

Sermon for 24th December 2017 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)
2 Sam. 7. 1-11, 16; Ps. 89. 1-4, 19-26; Rom. 16. 25-end; Luke 1. 26-38.
May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“You will conceive in the womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” These words spoken by the angel Gabriel to Mary are familiar to us now and we perhaps think little about them. But to Mary, betrothed as she was soon to marry Joseph, they must have come initially as a great shock. What would people say? Would Joseph refuse to marry her, on the grounds that she must have had intercourse with another man? What amazing trust she had which enabled her to say simply: **“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”** Ten years ago I had the privilege to preach on this same Sunday, when the gospel reading was from Matthew, the only other gospel writer to give us much detail about the birth of Jesus. Matthew wrote from the point of view of Joseph, who at first resolved to “dismiss her quietly”. I tried to imagine Joseph telling Jesus about the circumstances of his birth shortly after they had returned from Jerusalem after his twelfth birthday. Since they were betrothed, Mary was already Joseph’s property, even though she would continue to live with her parents until the wedding day. I wondered aloud whether Joseph might have taken Mary to the village elders but held back because they might decide to stone Mary or at least commit her to many lashes. Instead he resolved to dismiss her quietly in order to avoid her public disgrace. Fortunately, before he acted, Joseph had a vision in which the Lord told him much the same as Gabriel told Mary in Luke’s account, including the instruction that **“you are to name him Jesus”**, adding the explanation **“for he will save his people from their sins.”** - as with many Jewish names of the time, there was a religious connotation attached; Jesus meant “Saviour”, which as we know in the case of this new baby was the all-embracing purpose of his birth. Although I don’t suppose for one minute that Joseph could have appreciated the full significance, he as a righteous Jew would have recognised the underlying meaning and would probably also have called to mind the passage that Matthew quotes from Isaiah: **“the virgin shall conceive and bear a son.”** He would probably also have been aware of the passage from today’s Old Testament reading from the second book of Samuel, which tells of God’s covenant with David (the famous forefather of Joseph) that his throne would be established for ever - referred to also in today’s Psalm 89.

At this season of the year we Christians rejoice to celebrate the birth of Jesus, whom we believe from all the gospel writings and the other books of the bible to be that promised Saviour, not just for us but for all people who believe and trust in him. And it is good that we celebrate in family and church gatherings and by singing hymns and carols of praise and joy. But the season of Advent not only prepares us to celebrate Jesus’s birth; it also seeks to prepare us for his coming again in power and great glory, by warning us to wait patiently; to watch and pray earnestly for our Lord to fulfil his promise; and to prepare ourselves so that we are not caught unawares when he comes. We are reminded throughout the year of our belief every time we recite one of the Creeds. The Nicene Creed, for example, reminds us that Jesus 'shall come again with glory' and that we are to look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Have we forgotten the urgency of this message and have we become complacent, as the Church, the body of Christ, because nearly two thousand years have elapsed since Jesus ascended into heaven? We seem to think that we can bumble along, doing good here and there as best we can, all the while failing to recognise the signs of the times – wars, natural disasters, and more particularly, at the present time, climate change which seems to threaten the very existence of the planet earth. Now I don't for one minute believe that God will allow us to reach such a catastrophic state, but that is all the more reason for looking expectantly for our Lord's coming again.

In the meantime, while we await the Lord’s return, we do have to live **in** the world and to

support our neighbours who have not yet received the good news. As first John the Baptist and then Jesus himself proclaimed: ***“the kingdom of heaven has come near”***, and this remains true today. This involves us Christians trying as best we can and with God’s help to live our lives after the example of our Lord. Then we may find it easier to talk to our neighbours and seek to share with them the gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ. Few of us may be called to active missionary service, whether in this country or abroad, but we should always be ready to show our faith in our every day life – not ostentatiously, but simply. We must always remember that the gospel is for everyone and that the promise of resurrection life is available to everyone, and that the Church can only be fully inclusive, open to all. Finally we need to keep in mind the urgency of the gospel message: ***“the kingdom of heaven has come near”*** and hold uppermost in our thoughts and prayers Jesus's promise that He **will** come again. And so the message I leave today, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, repeats words from one of the Advent Antiphons: ***“O Emmanuel, our King and our lawgiver, the Desire of all nations and their Salvation. Come and save us, O Lord our God.”***

To the God who showed His love for us by sending His only Son to be born as man, to die for us and rise again that we might live, be all honour, glory, might and power, thanksgiving and praise, this Christmastide and for evermore. Amen.