

## **ADVENT 4 2019 - MARY**

Christmas is a time when there are extra communion services – for the sick and housebound and in Nursing Homes and so on. At times like this I sometimes think of the many different places and situations where I have celebrated the sacrament.

I remember having to clear a kitchen table of stale food and a dog's bone to try and find a place for the chalice and paten in the home of an old lady who was a recluse. Or the informal celebration in the open air with a group of young people at a diocesan summer camp. In a hospice there was a special sense of quiet and suppressed sorrow at the bed side with a family as their loved received for the last time.

Or I remember the old navy captain who with failing eye sight never needed a service sheet because he knew all the words.

I remember bringing communion to an old lady with a Jack Russel who rather liked visitors. But when the service started the dog would lie down quietly in the corner, until the last Amen when he would be up again and share the peace with me in his own special way!

To me those celebrations were as important and as meaningful as the Eucharist that, say, marked the consecration of a new bishop when I was the Archbishop of Dublin's chaplain. For those services the cathedral sanctuary would be stuffed with bishops in their full regalia, and every move and gesture had been

carefully choreographed and rehearsed. All accompanied by beautiful music.

Two very contrasting settings for celebrating the Eucharist – one pastoral, the other full of pomp and ceremony.

And when we come to Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom we think about on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent, there are equally two contrasting ways of considering her.

On the “high” side there is the adoration of Mary making her into a semi-divine being. Ever virgin and never having any other children, born sinless and being taken up into heaven before she died – what is known as the Assumption. Places where she has been seen in visions are venerated – Lourdes, Fatima, Walsingham, Ireland’s Knock have become special places of pilgrimage – but also of great commercialisation. In her exalted state people are encouraged to pray to her for special favours.

And there is a place for that kind of devotion and many can find it very spiritually energising, for after all in St. Luke’s account of the Annunciation, the angel greets her as having found favour with God, and her cousin Elizabeth greets her as “blessed among women”.

But there’s another, way of looking at and learning from Mary’s story. And that is as an ordinary girl from an ordinary village in the less prestigious part of Palestine. Nazareth had none of the prestige of Jerusalem. In fact, as a town it was looked down on.

As Nathaniel sarcastically remarked when approached by Jesus, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” A small town filled with country yokels with a distinctive dialect.

And yet I sometimes wonder whether this more simple way of looking at Mary is nearer the truth than some of the legends that have come to be associated with her.

Is not the ordinariness of Mary a better way of understanding the Incarnation rather than putting her up on a heavenly pedestal? Is not the point of the Incarnation that God in Jesus comes into the mess and struggle of our ordinary everyday lives? Is not the message of Mary’s call that God chooses and uses ordinary people to do special and extraordinary things for him?

While we accord a special place in our liturgy to Mary, we must not make her so different from us that it puts her example outside the reach of ordinary mortals.

God can be found in high and holy places like cathedrals and churches, but he can also be found around kitchen tables and hospital bedsides.

God’s will is done by the saints of all ages whom we remember and revere throughout the church’s year, but his will and work is no less done by those who will never be famous or have a special day named after them, or sometimes even recognised for what they do.

In treating Mary as too special we can lose a sense of God working in and through ordinary people and events.

For Jesus was born in a manger – not a mansion. His first visitors were shepherds - not kings and princes. In his early life he worked as a carpenter – he didn't walk along the corridors of privilege and power. And at the end he was crucified like a common criminal and laid in a borrowed tomb.

God is inclusive, not exclusive.

He is present when the Eucharist is celebrated with all the pomp and ceremony the church can muster. But God is also present in the informal pastoral occasions wherever there is need of comfort, strength, healing and hope, where the circumstances are more simple than privileged.

Yes, Mary was specially called and chosen. God's favour rested on her, not for her status but for her service, her special-ness was in her humility and obedience – “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

Writing to the Corinthians Paul had this to say:-

“Now remember what you were, my brothers and sisters, when God called you. From the human point of view, few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing.

God purposefully chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful.”

Humble service and not high standing is what is important to God.

On this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent we rightly remember and give thanks for Mary and we do indeed call her blessed. But let's not put her beyond our reach but celebrate that God uses the ordinary to do extraordinary things, and that he can be as much experienced in the pastoral as in pomp and ceremony, in the simple as well as the privileged.

I will end with the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, an American Episcopalian priest and Professor of Religion.

She writes:-

“Decide to live the life God has given you – right now.  
Refuse to live yesterday over and over again.  
Resist the temptation to save your best for tomorrow  
Do not put off living the life you are meant to live.  
Live prepared!”

God called Mary, but equally he calls you and me to serve him too. And not just serve him but have life to the full while we are doing it.