

20 December 2020
ADVENT 4

Already we are on the eve of Christmas. Families are already travelling and the mad rush to stock up is in full swing. I know when our children were young the week before Christmas verged on a nightmare, as each day they would ask, "How Long" and we would religiously count off the number of sleeps. As they grew older their expectations and understandings about Christmas changed but not their enthusiasm. Christmas in a clergy person's home has one disadvantage. We are often exhausted by Christmas day and often simply want to rest rather than celebrate with carol singing having lost its appeal. This did not stop my children, even knowing I had probably not got home till about 2am, they were up and about by 6am wanting to open and give presents.

In the wider community today and for the remainder of the week traffic increases dramatically. Shopping centres have extended hours. Television and other media outlets are encouraging us to spend for the sake of the economy and plans for family gatherings finalized. Unfortunately, in Australia the celebration of Christmas seems to end at Midnight Christmas Day and the Boxing day Test and holidays begin in full swing. This is understandable given our climate but I suggest it robs us of the spirit of the Christmas season.

Today is also a time of heightened expectation in the church as well. But it is an expectation of a different sort. In the Church we move from a time of reflection and preparation to one of anticipation and fulfillment of God's promise. A babe is to be born in Bethlehem in a manger, as the story from Matthew foretells.

The journey for the happy couple, Mary and Joseph with their new son begins in crisis and much suffering and the journey of struggle lays a head for this new babe and his parents. They become refugees and the journey towards Jerusalem begins from this moment. Our texts for this Sunday catch something of the favour, "already but not yet".

To help me focus on the days ahead I have been re-reading a collection of reflections by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany and the reflections were written from his prison, a condemned man who challenged the Nazi regime in Germany and yet a hopeful man as his reflections demonstrate. He prayed continually, "may your Kingdom come", while enduring physical hardship and deprivation, then to lose his life 10 days before the end of the Second World War. His words resonate with me at this time with ongoing conflicts at home and abroad. His words resonate with me as we as a nation slash our Foreign Aid budget to some of the poorest places on the globe, ignore the plight of the refugees held in detention or continue to deny benefits to those most in need or deal with Climate change.

Can you remember in your life a moment or occasion, a revelation, a life-changing event, a kind of moment after which life is never the same again? An AHA moment. This is precisely I am sure that Mary felt as recorded by Luke.

What have been your life changing experiences? The time when you were confident that you have made the right choice about your career or lifelong partner, or the death of a loved one, or perhaps the breakdown of a relationship, the realization that something is not right, or when listening to music, viewing art or simply being a friend to another. These are all life changing experiences, some immensely good for us and others that challenge who we are and what we believe. Sometimes we run away from such experiences or pretend they do not exist, while others we embrace with enthusiasm.

In today's Gospel we read and hear of a momentous change event that must have been startling, unbelievable, astonishing, surprising and frightening to a young 15-16-year-old girl. Mary lacks all the credentials that most human beings think important for anyone making such a dramatic change in history. What qualifications did Mary have for the task. Indeed, almost everything is against her: age, inexperience, gender, material possessions and powerlessness. I wonder what Mary was doing at the time the angel Gabriel appeared to her. Perhaps she was doing the household duties, fetching water, and thinking about her forthcoming marriage to Joseph, praying or scrubbing the floor? There is no mention in Luke's Gospel as why Mary has been chosen to be the mother of Jesus. More is said about Joseph {he is of the house of David}. Even in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth Luke explains that they are righteous and blameless. A word is not spoken about the virtues or vices of Mary. This of course is precisely the point. God chooses and Mary does not earn or deserve to be the mother of Jesus any more than any other woman.

Mary as we have just heard receives a shattering and awe-inspiring moment. This is a moment that will change her life and the world forever. Her child would be different. I know from the birth of our own children and now grandchildren that we hope for normal healthy children and so do all parents. Mary on the other hand is not only to give birth by the Holy Spirit but her child is to be different. Her first reaction to this news is caution, silence and puzzlement. As we read in the Gospel, "She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean."

Mary's life would never be the same as it is with us when we have a life changing experience. How much Mary understood of what happened at the time is unclear, but she does come to the realization that God is at work here and commits herself to be the voice and parent of this child Jesus. Her words in the Magnificat, {the song of Mary} as I said last week are revolutionary and challenges all that corrupts and exploits God's world.

Mary's world was turned upside down in a moment. She would never be the same. Her story gives her a unique place in history. But the story is much more than history. It is historic.

Mary's role in the story of Jesus is sadly often sentimentalized and ignored. She is a mother yes but much more. She sings a song of God proclaiming God and sees hope and aspiration not in celebrities, power brokers, bullies and oppressors, not in the rich or rich places but in the God who turns the world upside down by filling those who are hungry for grace and peace and sending the rich and complacent away empty. Some of my own experiences in my work at Anglicare occurred when I heard and listened to the stories of children and young people and the darkest periods of their life and the change in their lives by love, care and the attention of Foster parents form good families. The light shines in the darkest places when we embrace the light.

I suggest the world needs to hear Mary's song, perhaps more than ever, as we are a world obsessed with materialism, wealth accumulation and self-interest.

The question for us today and not only us but for all those rushing around at this time of the year is, are we willing, even able to allow God to transform our lives and the lives of those around us, even for a minute.

Amen.