

Reflection on Advent 4 by Rev'd Michael Last

St Paul concludes his letter to the Romans with the doxology that is today's epistle reading. It is not, though, just the conclusion of a letter, "yours sincerely Paul", it also encapsulates the underlying themes of the 4th Sunday of Advent.

The Annunciation to Mary, our gospel reading, may at first glance encourage us to focus our thinking on Mary. Yet this Sunday is as much about the nature and the way God works as it is about the character of Mary and her place in God's salvation plan, as critical as it was. The underlying reality is that all things begin and end with God. It is the Spirit who sustains and enables all those who place their hand in his and he does not always work in ways we would envisage or desire. Look at Mary – who would choose her? Only God would answer - yes.

Each of us has a part to play in God's unfolding plan, and in Mary's case a most important part. It is only as God moves that things begin to happen; as he touches things that his ultimate purpose that all nations might believe and obey him starts to become a living reality.

Go back to our Old Testament reading and King David's desire to build a temple. David has established himself and his position as King. He has made Jerusalem capital; his palace is built and now, the final part in his jigsaw, he draws up plans to build a temple to the Lord. Yet God through Nathan, has a message for David "Sorry, no that is not a job for you"

Underlying that response is the question of David's motivation: genuine pity, a deep desire to do something for God, who has done so much for him, despite his many failings? Or is there an element of self-legitimation?

Put a temple in the capital and David consolidates his control over the kingdom. Who is using whom? Is God using David or David using God?

Through Nathan, God reminds David exactly who is in control. God is in control: a God who will not be confined to one place; a God who moves with his people in his own way and at his own time. David does not need to build a temple to have God's presence with him – rather he must trust in God's promise. *"Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever."*

If David's aim was to use God for his own ends who are we to condemn? We all from times to do the same. We prefer a God who acts like a crutch, when we need him. Maybe we are not so keen on a God who makes us uncomfortable, a God who encourages us to take risks for him.

Contrast Mary, then, with David.

Mary - a young women, scarcely more than a girl, probably from the poorer end of society. She is engaged to be married to Joseph. All perfectly normal, she does not stand out from the crowd: and then an angel appears, telling her that she will become pregnant and have a child.

“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary is being invited by God to become the means of fulfilling the promise made to David and, in doing so, to move from the comfortable to the uncomfortable: to place her hand into God’s hand in a way that leaves her exposed and vulnerable.

This is God taking the initiative, in his way and at a time of his choosing. All Mary is asked to do is respond and allow God to be God, so Christ could come into the world. This not some protracted negotiation, her answer is simple and touches every part of her life *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*

This is the God we serve, who asks us to follow him. *“Take up your cross and follow me”*. One who asks us to move from the comfortable to the uncomfortable, one who asks the awkward questions we would prefer to avoid.

Mary gives us the example to follow – David provides the contrast.

Let me close with an image that sums up God’s salvation plan.

You are on Pilgrimage in the Holy Land and travelling to towards Nazareth. From a distance the town appears to lie in a beautiful position, nestling on the top of hill. Yet, as you approach, the illusion of peace and beauty fades away as you are met by the noise and stationary traffic - any romantic illusions about the place where annunciation took place are shattered.

There is one place you want to visit, and it dominates the skyline; a beautiful building that somehow marries together both the ancient and the modern: The Basilica of the Annunciation. As you enter the courtyard in front of the basilica, your eyes cannot help but be caught by the mosaics that surround you.

Each one depicts Mary with the Christ child: each one doing so from the perspective, tradition and culture of a different country. It’s a rich and diverse mix of styles and colours. As you reflect on the images you cannot fail to be struck by the key place Mary has had in God’s plan for salvation. St Luke recalls her cousin Elizabeth putting like this— *“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”*

The diversity of styles and colours in these mosaics remind you of the global, the universal implications of the annunciation and the incarnation in a way not possible in words. It makes

you ask how and why should it be like this: that the visit of an angel to a young women could turn the world upside down?

The answer is in what lies behind the Annunciation. It is not to do with praise of or to a single woman - Mary. Rather it is about God; a God who works in ways that can appear at times foolish; a God who uses the small and the lowly to bring glory to himself and salvation to the creation which he loves and cares for.

The Annunciation is about God's grace in action of the miracle of the incarnation - of God coming down to his world, with all it's need, with all its pain, with all its suffering and its sin - of God meeting with humanity that had rejected him and saying, come to me.

It is that which we celebrate later this week, on Christmas Day.