

## **WORSHIP 20TH DECEMBER 2020**

### **OPENING PRAYER & WELCOME**

Welcome St John's to this, the fourth Sunday of Advent where we remember the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary – the Annunciation.

Lord, you are with us wherever we go: you are our God and the Rock of our salvation. You come to us each day and always. Lord open our eyes to your presence, open our hearts to your love, open our minds to your indwelling, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### **LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT CANDLES**

Lord Jesus, light of the world, blessed is Gabriel, who brought good news; blessed is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Bless your Church preparing for Christmas; and bless us your children, who long for your coming. Amen.

### **HYMN: Rejoice O highly favoured one**

We are now going to have our two readings read by two of my friends, Lulu will read from Romans and Sarah will read from Luke. Read in a Cumbrian barn – so you can all see what we get up to in the depths of rural Cumbria.

#### **ROMANS 16: 25-END. (NIV)**

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, **26** but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from [f] faith— **27** to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

#### **LUKE 1:26-38 (The Message Bible)**

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: "Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty. Beautiful inside and out! God be with you".

She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

He will be great, be called 'Son of the Highest.'

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David;

He will rule Jacob's house forever—no end, ever, to his kingdom." Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man."

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you; Therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God. And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God."

And Mary said, "Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say". Then the angel left her.

## REFLECTION

This Gospel reading is so well known. Depicted by artists throughout the centuries, this angelic being appearing to Mary. The Angel all aglow with wings and bright light and Mary looking on peacefully and bathed in holy light.

But you know I like to think that the reality of this encounter may have been somewhat different. We don't really know if the Angel appeared with wings and a halo, for the bible says "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it". (Hebrews 13:12) So maybe the Angel looked like a regular 1st century man?

I also think of Mary working in the kitchen of her home when this encounter happened. Well, where else would a teenage young woman be in those days, except perhaps getting water at a well?

I don't know about you, but if a strange man, or even more startling an Angelic being, appeared to me in my kitchen I would think I would be a bit shaken or even think I was losing my marbles! No wonder she was troubled at his words!

This stranger goes on to tell her she is going to conceive and give birth to a son to be called Jesus, he will be great, the son of the most high and be given a throne and reign forever.

In the Anglican liturgy we have beautiful words to describe this, we call it the Magnificat. The words are beautiful, full of awe and wonder. We can get all misty eyed at the beauty of it all.

But again, I think the reality may not have been so beautiful for Mary at that moment. Let's just think about it. For one she is a virgin, and if this comes about what are her parents, Anna and Joachim, let alone Joseph going to think? "Yes, really Mary, come on we were not born yesterday, you must have been with some other man".

So, she faces shame, being seen as a liar, and also in those days, the reality is that not only may Joseph now refuse to marry her, she faces death by stoning.

The remarkable thing is that Mary is so convinced of the reality and truth of this encounter she accepts, "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled".

Of course, the Angel tells her about her cousin Elisabeth, who even in her old age is six months pregnant. Later in the story we hear how Mary goes to visit Elisabeth and finds out this is true, which maybe helps Mary trust in the truth of this encounter. After all there was no mail or internet or telephones for such news to travel quickly.

So, what does this teach us today? Well, we can become convinced in a very real way that God is speaking to us and has called us to take on a task that may not win us any popularity contests, or demands doing something that makes us afraid or seems impossible in our own circumstances. Is God really calling me to take up children's work,

become a helper, set up a food bank? If you feel stirrings to some kind of service you can be assured God will keep confronting you with this idea until you are convinced it is real. You will suddenly find reading articles, seeing something on TV or people say something to you that keeps the idea alive. It will simply not go away. And like Mary visiting Elisabeth and at least finding the truth of that pregnancy, you will be faced with some confirming evidence to assure you this is truth. It can be a confusing time, but peace will come.

I do believe people entertain angels and do not know it. There are many books and stories I have heard from people about a helpful stranger appearing at just the right moment to help; you may have experienced this yourself.

So, let us remember that God speaks through all kinds of circumstances and ways to us ordinary human beings. Mary was simply an ordinary young woman; we are simply old and young people, not famous, not great, not powerful. We go about our ordinary lives and in the very ordinary day to day, God calls each one of us to do or be someone who does his work.

But remember, it is a choice, for each one of us to make the decision between, “no thanks do not fancy doing that”, or yes “I am the Lord’s servant, may your word to me be fulfilled”.  
**Amen**

## **PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION FROM LOIS**

Dear Father God,

We thank you for your word in the Bible, for this story of Mary’s encounter with the angel and the promise of a son who will be the Son of God.

Please help us to be open to hear your calling and to have the faith to humbly accept your way for us, as Mary did. We thank you, that your word encourages us that with you nothing is impossible and that you empower us by your Holy Spirit, to do what you ask us.

As we approach Christmas, we pray for government leaders and others in authority, for wisdom as they seek to make difficult decisions for the wellbeing of all.

We pray you will give us wisdom in how we interact this Christmas, to help protect one another’s health. We thank you for the vaccines and pray for the safe and effective administration of these.

We pray for those who are unwell, those who are bereaved, those who are isolated or self-isolating, those who are struggling financially, with work or other difficulties, for your healing, comfort and provision. We pray for those who seek to care for and support others, for your wisdom, strength and compassion. We lift those known to us in need of prayer in a quiet moment now...

We pray for the health and wellbeing of the communities where we live and work. We thank you for advent and Christmas services in the church building and online and pray that you may draw people to tune in and hear your message. We pray for your blessing on those taking part in Carols on the Doorstep later today, for fair weather and for the joy of Christmas to be shared.

We pray for Christians and churches around the world as we celebrate and seek to share the message of your coming with others, that you would empower us by your Holy Spirit. Please encourage and strengthen Christians who face persecution.

We ask all these prayers in the name of Jesus. Amen.

## **HYMN: FOR I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU**

### **PEACE & BLESSING**

God is able to strengthen you and keep you. The peace of the Lord be always with you.  
**And also with you.**

To the only wise God be praise and glory forever and ever. To God who is our Rock and our Salvation be blessing and honour. And the blessings of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you and those you love this day and always. **Amen**