

there's something about mary

a sermon preached on the
fourth sunday of advent

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by mother emily fraser

the lections: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89: 1-4, 19-27; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Today we have reached the fourth Sunday of Advent, the final Sunday before Christmas Day. Four candles of the wreath are lit and when we next gather, for the Christmas Mass, the central candle of the wreath will be lit, signifying that Christ is with us, and the light of Christ is illuminating the world.

So the nativity is almost here, but not quite. Our journey towards the crib and the birth is not yet complete – there are things to hear and ponder in our hearts in the days to come before we begin to rejoice in the birth of the Christ in the stable in Bethlehem.

The readings of the day are full of prophecies, and we have heard many prophetic words throughout the season of advent. Even the readings from morning and evening prayer during advent focus on books of prophecies – the current evening prayer lections are from the books of Isaiah and Revelation. This is a time when we are surrounded by the promise of things to come, but must wait until it is time for them to come to pass.

So let's briefly examine today's readings.

First there's the Second Book of Samuel, in which Nathan speaks to David a prophecy about the land in which Israel will settle. A prophecy of a home in which Israel can find peace and safety, a place where they can find rest. This prophecy holds out a promise that Israel will find a homeland, somewhere they can settle and call their own, in the knowledge that this is the land they shall inhabit for generations. When Christ is born, he will be heralded as a descendent of David, and this title appears and reappears throughout Christ's life and ministry; most memorably shouted by the crowds on Palm Sunday as he enters Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to their calls – “Hosanna to the Son of David!”

Second, there are the words of the Letter to the Romans, which speaks to the importance of prophecies and prophetic words – through them, and through the prophets great things are revealed and people are drawn in faith to God.

And finally, in the Gospel according to Luke, we hear the annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, which could be called the prophecy of prophecies. Gabriel greets Mary, and announces to her that she will bear the Christ. Mary hears the words of the Angel, receives them with wonder and amazement, and responds, ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’.

It's this text and this remarkable moment that I want to stay with and explore.

When we hear this exchange between Gabriel and Mary, there is much to reflect on.

We hear Gabriel's prophetic words about Christ, and his salvific role in liberating and reconciling humanity to God. It is spoken in terms of power, of Christ receiving the throne of his ancestor David. But we can also hear this as a promise that Christ will bring humanity back into relationship with God and be for us an embodiment of God's love. This infant that Mary will bear will change the world, but, as always, the world will be changed, just not in the way

that we expect. Christ will not reign as a triumphant monarch, making pronouncements, surrounded by the powerful and mighty and important. He will live in humility, teaching and preaching those who gathered around him, surrounded by the poor, the excluded and the unimportant.

And we hear Mary's response to Gabriel. We hear how this young woman, engaged to Joseph, replies to this heavenly visitation and the news that she will bear such a child as the Christ.

Her words have rung throughout generations. Mary represents many different things to different Christians, and has done so for many generations. She has inspired beautiful music, settings of the *Magnificat*, the *Song of Mary*, as has the words of the Angel's greeting – the *Ave Maria*. The Angelus, which we pray every Sunday at noon, begins by recalling this moment between Gabriel and Mary and its impact on our lives and the whole world.

Mary is praised for her obedience to God, and she is obedient to her calling, but she is not blindly obedient. Mary has an enquiring mind. She asks the angel how these things may be, she hears what is said and considers it deeply and prayerfully. She accepts the angel's greeting and the tidings brought, but not unquestioningly. To my mind, she is a figure whose faith allows her to think at depth on what has happened and will happen to her.

She will become the theotokos, she will bear the Christ, and this is a path that will not be without pain and sorrow. This journey will begin with the strain of childbirth in the stable in Bethlehem, and will end in tears at the foot of the cross. But Mary is willing to travel it, just as Christ will be willing to travel it.

In Mary we have a young woman who heard God's call, pondered her vocation, and responded with joy, despite the unknown path to which this would lead. Thanks be to God for Mary's joyful response, and for her daring to make that response.

My prayer for us all in these final days of advent is that, like Mary, we may hear the words of the prophecy, of the coming of the Christ into the world, ponder them in our hearts and by pondering, be open to the work and word of God this advent, and ready to celebrate with joy, awe and wonder on Christmas Day.

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