

Act of Worship at Home for Sunday 22 December 2024 Fourth Sunday in Advent

Welcome to this act of worship at home and the last one that I will be writing in the foreseeable future. It has been a joy to share with you in this time of worship over the past couple of years.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent in the Methodist Church is a day to celebrate God's love and to remember the promises God has made. I am going to begin with part of a bidding prayer taken from a service of lessons and carols that Rod and I attended in Brenchley, Kent, last Sunday:

Beloved in the Lord, we have come to this time to worship together, drawn by the love of him whose birth amongst us we now make ready to recall and to celebrate. We come from the distractions of our living into His house of prayer and of peace, so that our hearts may be prepared to receive Him whom we would serve and adore. We are mindful how mighty is this gift of God to the world and what weight of hope lies wrapped within. He whom we partly know, we come praying to know more; whom we partly love, we come praying to love more. And so that our hearts may be touched and stirred, we turn once again to the scene of God's coming, born of Mary, his mother and of the Holy Spirit, in faithful obedience to God. We remember those, humble of heart, who gathered to the Lord at His human birth. We place ourselves amongst the numberless and unseen company who, over the years and in countless different circumstances, have been brought to kneel at the manger of Lord Jesus, to make offering of themselves and to stretch out their hands to be grasped by His, never more to be let go. We rejoice in the coming of our Lord. **Amen**

Reading

The lectionary gospel reading for today focusses on Mary and is taken from Luke, Chapter 1 and a selection of verses from 26-54: *In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High..." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.*

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth ...And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."

Reflection: In the account of Gabriel's visit to Mary and then her subsequent visit to Elizabeth, a relative, possibly her cousin, we see two marginalised pregnant women meet up to comfort and support each other. Elizabeth is well beyond child-bearing years yet has found herself pregnant and, just when it would be useful to have the help of her husband, he's been made mute for doubting an angel. Her pregnancy wasn't a surprise but a downright shock. One can imagine the village gossip when the neighbours heard the news and heaven knows what fears Elizabeth would

have bearing a child at her age and wondering how long she would have with the child before her own demise. Then we have teenage Mary, pregnant out of wedlock – a precarious place for a woman in Palestine in that era – as now. Joseph could have broken off the engagement or could have had her stoned as an adulteress. Mary’s ‘yes’ to the angel was both radical and dangerous. She was immensely brave.

So here are two pregnant women, one far too old and the other probably far too young by our standards. One bears the messenger, the other the message. Both are in the story here without reference to men – Zechariah’s off somewhere being silent, Joseph is out of the picture. Both women must have been battling with doubt and fear, wondering what God had in mind for them. These two women – each isolated in their own way - sought connection and community as their worlds were turned upside down.

In this, they are not that dissimilar to us. We need to find connection and community in a world which is often fragmented. Loneliness is a big problem even for people who have countless online friends. The news is everywhere in all sorts of forms of media and yet we are not always sure that we are being told the truth. People are judged before facts are known. We long for authentic connection and true community, where we can know and be known and where we won’t be judged unfairly. Surely this was what Mary and Elizabeth found in each other and what we should build in the Church. But in the Church, do we give Mary the respect that she deserves? In some denominations, she is made to be meek and submissive, denying her womanhood; she is exalted with heavenly glory but with none of her earthly strength and revolutionary fervour. In other denominations, she is ignored altogether. Yet the Magnificat, Mary’s song is, in many ways, revolutionary. Perhaps we need to get more familiar with her words to help us see the world as it is and how it should be. I appreciate this may seem rather unsettling on the verge of Christmas. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted that Mary’s song is the oldest Advent hymn saying: “This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”

So let’s sing it Tim Dudley-Smith’s rousing hymn which can be found at number 186 in Singing the Faith: **“Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!”**

1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his
name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has
done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name, the Lord, the mighty One.

3. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his
might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to
flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children’s children and for evermore!

Blessing: Our service has ended. Go now and hold your light out to the world and let people of all nations feel the warmth of God’s love as they encounter the Word made flesh though Christ our Lord. May we all follow, where the Spirit of hope leads us; listen, as the child of peace cries for us; rejoice as the love of God embraces us, and let us go with Hope, Peace and love in our hearts and the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit forever within us. **Amen**

Paula Littlewood