

SERMON AT MASS FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2015.

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St Michael's Cornhill

In the days before any attempt had been made to revise the scheme of readings for Advent, the episode we've just heard about was celebrated on July 2.

A priest I know was heard to begin a sermon on that day as follows:

Today in heaven, our Lady will be having tea with Saint Elizabeth.

I don't know what he said after that, but I expect it's the only thing people remembered.

To see this episode only as a stage in the unfolding of the legends that surround the birth of Jesus is to miss the point of Luke's including it in his Gospel.

It doesn't really matter whether Mary actually did go to Ain Karim to visit her cousin, although tradition has it Mary told Luke all this, hence its inclusion.

But the Gospels are not biographies: they were written with a particular purpose in mind, and Luke is no exception.

As we hang on to the last few days before Christmas, it's important to reflect on the meaning of the Christ-event for us christians.

If we can't actually make some attempt at articulating the heart of the faith, our reason for being here, then we are in no position to complain if others hijack our best tunes.

I don't much care about Christmas being materialistic.

After all we live in a material world, and the heart of the coming festival is about the Word made flesh being born into this material world.

We know no other.

What bothers me is that Christians, mainstream Christians, seem so reluctant either to talk about or reflect on, their central beliefs.

It's sometimes almost as if everything were self-evident.

Is Christianity merely part of our culture, and at Christmas just a decoration like robins, stagecoaches and, heaven forbid, Santa?

And is this thing we're involved in simply historical, where we look back wistfully to the golden age which, if we are to believe the author of the hymn *It came upon a midnight clear*, comes round again?

Surely not.

If it is then we'd all be better off watching it all on television in the comfort of our homes.

And don't they do it well!

But no: at the heart of all our preparations, at the heart of everything that the coming Christmas and ever will be, is God.

God, who loves us and calls us into relationship with himself, and who calls us into co-operation with him to achieve his purposes and establish his loving rule among us.

It is the end and purpose of human existence to love this God and to enjoy him for ever, because he is the maker of all that is, we are made in his image and are meant for him.

To recognise God's love for us and to allow him to achieve his purposes in us is to be fully human.

To put our whole trust in him without knowing what there is in store for us, to live a life of risk for God, is to be blessed.

So that little scene at Ain Karim is not some genteel Palestinian tea party, the cucumber sandwiches beginning to curl in the sun.

No.

It is about Elizabeth recognising the blessedness of Mary.

Of all women you are the most blessed. Blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.

This doesn't mean that Mary is placed on a pedestal level with her divine Son, still less that we should worship her.

She is only a human being like us.

Nor should we assume that Mary had some special and specific knowledge of the purpose of this birth and the course the life of Jesus would take.

John the Baptist didn't fully understand Jesus, and nor did Mary.

When the twelve-year-old Jesus was lost on the way back to Jerusalem the child explains that he was in his Father's house. But Mary and Joseph did not understand what he meant.

An episode in Mark further expands this impression of perplexity on the part of his family: He went home again, and once more such a crowd collected that they could not even have a meal. When his

relations heard of this, they set out to take charge of him; they said, *He is out of his mind.*

Later his mother and his brothers turn up and send a message asking for him. He replied: *Who are my mother and my brothers?*' And looking at those sitting in a circle round him, he said, *'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.'*

That, oddly enough, is the key to Mary's blessedness, and it is expanded further by Luke: *It happened that as he was speaking a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said, 'Blessed the womb that bore you and the breasts that fed you!' But he replied, 'More blessed still are those who hear the word of God and keep it'.*

In other words, our common vocation is to hear the word of God and keep it.

That vocation is perfectly fulfilled in Mary, who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would come to fruition.

The statement of the depth of her response and the strength of her commitment is in her reply to the Angel Gabriel: *You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said*

That is why all generations are to call Mary blessed.

That is why her fame has been in danger of tipping the balance towards idolatry.

And that is why she has been seen as the second Eve: the one who restores the damage to humankind's relationship with God by the Fall. *Eva*, the Latin name of Eve, becomes *Ave*, the greeting Mary accepted from Gabriel.

Everyone knows that the reaction of reformed Christianity is to try and ignore Mary.

But you can't: she's there.

Whatever our tradition we ought to take her seriously, because in her simplicity she points to the blessedness of faith, which in the end is all that is asked of us.

As the pattern for our believing, she reminds us that all are called, and that none of us can afford to assume that the business of witnessing to the overflowing love of God is someone else's.

Through our baptism we are members of the body of Christ, all Christians of equal status.

No person is more Christian than another, especially not because of any particular function we may have within the body, and not because of any good works that we have done.

All of us, like Mary, are Christ-bearers.

As her faith and obedience made possible the incarnation, so our faith and obedience are the means whereby the Word made flesh becomes known in the world today.

It's easy to belittle that function of the members of the body, yet it's true that by our scale of priorities others are brought to acknowledge the generous love of God.

It would be a wonderful thing if people we encountered were filled with the Holy Spirit because of us.

It will only happen if our faith and obedience are modelled on Mary's.

It will only happen if people can say of us, *Blessed are those who believe that the promise made them by the Lord will be fulfilled.*