

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
Fourth Sunday in Advent ~ December 24, 2017
“Christmas Eve”

I had to go to visit the dentist last week. I was sitting quietly, if nervously, in the waiting room – when the door suddenly burst open and an elderly lady staggered in, proclaiming to the receptionist in a very loud voice: “Oh, how I do hate Christmas” I’m afraid that I covered up my dog collar in case I were to inflame the poor lady’s temper. We regard Advent as a season of expectancy, of looking forward to a full and enjoyable Christmas celebration. But then there is another side to it all for many people. Just because I may be enjoying this season doesn’t mean everyone is – people who are facing redundancy, people who are ill, who are bereaved, who are lonely, who are just plain grumpy for no particular reason, such as the lady I met last week. However it is interesting that the Church of England has noticeably changed the style of its message over the years. We are being encouraged to return to the simplicity of Christmas. Archbishop John of York has encouraged people to “make room for the manger” and Archbishop Justin of Canterbury has encouraged people to make their gift giving simple and small, while still being meaningful for the recipients.

Yet it remains true that we still need to work as hard as ever to get the real message of Christmas across to people. Today in Church on the last Sunday in Advent, we turn our focus on Mary. I do genuinely wonder what Mary and Elizabeth were feeling at this time? Calm or anxious? Excited or fearful? Probably a mixture of all these emotions and more. The whole atmosphere in this week’s Bible readings is full of expectancy and the sense that what we are looking forward to has already begun to be fulfilled. The theme of this morning’s readings is that when we co-operate with God, amazing things happen. So when we discover human beings like Mary willing to lay aside

so much in obedience and out of love, we are watching the most real and beautiful of human nature – God and humanity co-operating together for the good of the world.

This morning we are given the chance to press the pause button as Mary and Elizabeth meet, with their unborn children within them, and wonder at what can happen when we allow God to work in us and with us for the good of the world. ‘I am the Lord’s servant’ Mary quietly proclaims. Mary – an image of outer calmness and serenity, whatever her inner turmoil. But in truth of course we don’t know what it was all like – we don’t know what Mary was like. I had to visit Ely Cathedral last year and saw, in the Lady Chapel, an amazingly powerful image of Mary as a very strong, spirited and feisty woman.

‘I am the servant of the Lord – Mary not necessarily understanding at all what was to happen, but accepting the inevitable – and that characterised her life as she walked with Jesus the way of life that he was to follow – as do the most faithful of all mothers, even today, if they can but see it. Above all, what Mary shows is that when we co-operate with God, amazing things can happen. You may well have experienced that in your lives – many may experience such a thing this Christmas – a time when, above all, we give thanks to God for the wonderful gift of his Son to our world. May this be a very special Christmas for us all.