

Advent Sunday 4A 21.12.25

Both Mary in Luke's gospel and Joseph in today's gospel from Matthew need persuading in order to take up this radical new path. It doesn't come naturally one might say – this birth of a child outside the strict norms of the Jewish society of the day. They need enlightenment, some word in their darkness to persuade them that the risk is worth taking, a prompt from God and they are just like us in this respect : full of doubts when a new course is offered or demanded, full of the whole range of emotions in the face of change. They are being asked to go beyond their fears and trust in a greater reality, in an unknown future and possibility, an act of love – for better or worse, in sickness or health.

Today we experience the longest nights of the year and the shortest days. We are at the turning of the year and in the middle of the singing of those wonderful O Antiphons which mark the build up to Christ's birth. Last night we sang of Jesus as O Clavis, the key of David who will open a door no one can shut. Tonight we sing O Oriens, O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness: come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death. I'm writing this now in darkness, waiting for that first glimmer of light on the horizon, that first sign of the turning of the planet into daylight, and that first flush may yet be a warning of worse to come – beautiful but deadly, for the hope we have is of a different order than the world can provide, or in the words of Vaclav Havel

*“Hope is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; It transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond it's horizons. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out”*

That's a big ask isn't it? Something I still struggle with. What on earth, is God up to now? How can it be God's will for the various cancers which afflict us, which can take away our loved ones, which blight the news at every turn. I won't list them - it's too depressing. But into this darkness a child is born – God help him one might say – and will taste the depths of our anguish, will know all the terrors and joys of what it means to be human - to know love which is always this experience of gain and loss, good and evil, the call to compassion, that is suffering with those we love. This is the love which takes us out of ourselves, that doubly miserable state which isolates us from the pain of others and merely confirms us in our own. This is the real work of unity. Mary and Joseph are being asked not to think themselves out of their narrow band of experience but to risk a larger world over which they have no control nor imagination. For in them God is recovering an image we long ago lost sight of: us as made in the image and likeness of God. So this babe in a manger represents or, re- presents, to us, the radical nature of our calling: it's root in our original calling, the wisdom of God in allowing us to both stray and return in freedom; the Lordship of Christ throughout as both creator, Word and redeemer; the key to all we are and to a future that has no end; the light calling us to truth and goodness; the king who wants to share his kingship with us; the Emmanuel who assures us that whatever comes, whatever we imagine to

the contrary, God is with us and always has been and always will be. Or in the words of the poet Malcolm Guite

*O come, O come and be our God- with- us  
O long sought With- ness for a world without,  
O Secret Seed, O hidden spring of light.  
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name,  
Come Root, and key and King, and holy Flame.  
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,  
Be folded with us into time and place,  
Unfold for us the mystery of grace  
And make a womb of all this wounded world.  
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,  
O tiny hope within our hopelessness  
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,  
To touch a dying world with new- made hands  
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.*

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