

NAURC @ Ipswich Road

Sunday 12th December 2021

Worship for the third Sunday of Advent

Including Holy Communion

Led by Revd John Potter

Welcome and notices

Lighting of the Advent candle and prayer:
A candle burns, the sign of your love.
God of Mary, come to us again this Advent.
May the light of your love be born anew in us.

By David Hamflett in "Candles and Conifers" WGRG

Worship song: [In a byre near Bethlehem](#)

Prayer of approach and confession

Lord, we lift our hearts in praise and worship to you,
seeking to learn from the example of Mary,
Glad that you are our Saviour
and that you remember us, your lowly servants.
We praise you for calling humans to do your work in the world,
for choosing ordinary people to do extraordinary deeds.

We praise you for your holy name,
known throughout generations,
and we praise you for the mercy you show to those who honour you.

We praise you for the workings of justice,
for the times when the mighty and proud have been brought down;
For the times when the lowly and hungry have been lifted and fed;
For the times when the rich have been made to realise the emptiness of material things;
We praise you for all the times when people across the world have seen injustice and have
brought about change.

We praise you for the promises you have kept and we place our trust in you for the continuing
promises which you make to all the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, to all who follow you and
seek to obey your commands.

Lord, we hold before you the shame we feel for our faults,
knowing that so often we fail to respond to your calling.
Often our excuses seem to be good ones,
but when we think of someone like Mary - willing to risk her life and reputation -
we become more aware of the conditions we attach to our willingness to serve.
You call us each in different ways,

According to our abilities and potential.
Forgive us when we identify with the mighty and proud,

rather than the lowly and hungry.

Forgive us and call us once again to do your will.

As we move closer to the celebration of your birth,
help us to accept you as Mary did - wholeheartedly,
willing to expect and accept the unexpected,
prepared to trust your way rather than the ways of the world.

Amen.

Introduction

> Strictly speaking this being the third week of Advent I should be taking another look at John the Baptist. But he usually gets two Sundays in Advent, so I am skipping a week to make room for Mary. This is because next week will be our special interactive Carol service looking forward to the celebrations of Christmas.

> Our worship today will be a bit different as I want to focus on both of Jesus' parents and there will be three short reflections instead of one sermon.

> The readings will also be different. As Mary's story in Luke and Joseph's story in Matthew are so familiar, I will make use of Bob Hartman's versions from his Rhyming Bible. You may recall we used them at the outdoor carols last year, but because we hadn't perfected the pa system at the time, they may have been difficult to hear.

Reading: "A woman called Mary" by Bob Hartman (based on Luke 1: 26-38)

Comments on Mary's story

> In Advent, especially now we are getting that bit closer to Christmas, there is a growing sense of expectation for many, especially the children.

> A few weeks ago, I went on a retreat that looked at the expectations of this time of year through different scripture passages. And I'd like to share some of the ideas that emerged from that.

> We begin with Mary.

> She was a young woman living in a rural village a couple of thousand years ago and life was very different then.

> The first thing to note is that I guess people had to grow up much faster as the mortality rate was so much higher – which is why it may seem odd to us that a woman in the 13 to 16 age group should be engaged – but that was the regular custom of the time.

> The way it worked (so we were told by Revd Richard who led the retreat) is that a 'betrothal' had been made, I don't know if it was an arranged marriage, but I'd guess it is a possibility.

> This would have been more formal than our sense of getting engaged – in practical terms it was the first stage of getting married and it usually lasted about a year. This is because it would give time for negotiations over the dowry that the bride's family would have to pay and the time it would take to save up for this.

> The wedding itself would be a grand affair lasting a whole week! The bride would first process through the village to the groom's house where the ceremony would take place and the festivities would involve the entire village.

> Weddings were a big deal for the entire community and Mary must have been so looking forward to this – getting dressed up and being the centre of attention.

> What's more she had married life and hopefully raising a family to look forward to as well – I guess Joseph would have been quite a 'catch' being the local carpenter come handy-man – well known and in much demand – the future looked bright for Mary with so much to look forward to.

- > But the horizons of her expectations were about to take a dramatic up-turn.
- > Here was a young woman who probably had high hopes for her life within the village in the way that everyone else's life was. Nothing wrong with that at all as stability counts for a lot.
- > That was, until she gets a visit from Gabriel.
- > It must have been mind-blowing!
- > Here is a young woman – just 13-16 years old, getting visited in this non-descript village by God's messenger! Of the women here today, can you imagine what that would have been like when you were in your middle teenage years?
- > Things like this don't happen to ordinary people – or do they?
- > Apart from the sheer shock of this messenger sent directly by God – this holy God whose name you couldn't even say sent greetings directly to her and she, Mary, was highly favoured *by God!*

- > The first thing is that Mary needed to be freed from the fear that had gripped her. Just think of the practicalities – when you are that scared no one can do anything, even less so, pay any attention to the important message that was to come.
- > The angel freed Mary from fear of what was happening and what was going to happen. There is real release in those words “do not be afraid” they open up huge possibilities with God.
- > Then comes the amazing message:
 “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. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.’
- > Physical impossibilities aside, her son was going to be even greater than the great king David the foremost figure in her nation's history – Jesus is God's Son!
- > Impossible! That would have been my reaction – but the angel says to Mary:
 “Nothing will be impossible with God.’ (1:37 NRSV).

- > In the course of one conversation, all of Mary's expectations changed - for better and worse.
- > What was her life going to be like as a hand-picked servant of God with a unique task ahead of her?
- > Life would certainly be completely different in the village – would the wedding even happen? And what about the ensuing scandal of her getting pregnant *before* getting married?
- > Her reply to the angel was one of remarkable faith:
 “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

Audio visual reflection: [The angel Gabriel from heaven came](#)

Reading: “Joseph, don't worry” by Bob Hartman (based on Matthew 1: 18-25)

Comment on Joseph's story

- > Let us now turn our attention to Joseph.
- > In the section about Mary, I outlined to high hopes for the entire village celebration being planned – a huge party, and getting married too. It doesn't get any more exciting than that!
- > Also, there is no mention of Joseph's age either – he may well have been a teenager too. So now he would have been looking forward to setting up as a family – probably with his own workshop and house too – but that an assumption on my part.
- > But just like Mary, his expectations would be with certain limits.
- > For Joseph though, the whole lot came crashing down when the news got to him that Mary had become pregnant *before* the wedding day. This was a disaster.
- > Custom allowed for Joseph to divorce her there and then and take her to a village tribunal to claim the dowry anyway.

> Whatever the outcome there was going to be disgrace – not only were his dreams for the future gone – his business would have been under threat too as the scandal would stick to him as well.

> I think it is a testament to Joseph's character that we are told that he planned to dismiss Mary quietly, to forget about the dowry and save her from the public tribunal process.

> I have often wondered that not only was Joseph honourable, but I think love had a lot to do with this story too.

> All this was until Gabriel appeared to Joseph too.

> Now it was his turn to have his expectations up-turned.

> Just like Mary, what he was expecting from his future was literally blown sky-high as he was told who Mary's son is and that his task would be to look after both God's Son and his wife to be who is to be the mother of Jesus.

> I can't overstate the impact this would have had on Joseph – a village carpenter visited by an angel with a personally addressed message from God!

> The visit ends with Joseph being told the baby's name: Jesus. Which means "God saves".

> Very much like the naming of John – this was to be a child in a new form of hybrid family – but one with God involved.

> The baby to be born would not take on the name and trade of his earthly father, but the ministry of His heavenly father.

Hymn: "Good Joseph" by Tom Gordon

(a new unpublished hymn, used with permission, tune is "Kingsfold")

Concluding comments

> For both Mary and Joseph what we know of their stories from the Bible they would have had high hopes for the future. Their future together.

> As many of us know, setting the date, making plans for the wedding and so looking forward to living the rest of your life together is unbelievably exciting.

> These were great expectations.

> Then all those hopes were overturned – were those visits by Gabriel actually good news?

> If you consider it from Mary and Joseph's initial perspective, I'm not at all sure it would have been. Would like you wedding plans wrecked?

> But once again God surprises and challenges human assumptions. Gabriel didn't visit someone of higher social status within King David's family line, or even the royalty of the time – no, God chose Nazareth and sent an angelic messenger to two teenagers – no one out of the ordinary, but with high hopes for the future.

> What happened to Mary and Joseph though, was less of an over-turning of their hopes – I think of it more like an up-turn.

> For they were called personally, by the holy, beyond imagining God, to be the parents of God's Son, Jesus.

> It's impossible to have any higher hopes than that isn't it?

> At the heart of this time of looking forward, Mary and Joseph's time of engagement, our time of Advent, lies the example that young couple set for us.

> What expectations do we have for the future?

> What are the horizons of our possibilities?

> Clearly none of us will be called to the exact same task as Mary and Joseph – but it may be that God has something in store for us – maybe as an individual, maybe as a church?

> How will we respond if the times comes for our expectations to be up-turned?

> I'll leave you with just one more thought.

> In amongst all the angelic visitations, the impossible suddenly becoming possible, messages directly from God and wedding plans thrown into confusion and an impending scandal that could engulf the village – in the middle of all this – in in the middle of all the tinsel, lights and razzamatazz of our Christmas celebrations – lies a love story between two young adults that made all of this possible.

> It's as simple as that.

Prayers of intercession and the Lord's Prayer

(Roots; and Hay and Stardust)

We gather today hearing the news of a birth.

Like Joseph we are invited to contemplate a world not as it is but how it could be.

So we pray in thanksgiving for Joseph, whom we barely know, but who, with Mary, bore the astonishing events of Christ's birth, in obedience and with a generous heart.

When our lives are upturned by the unexpected, and you reach out to us in dreams, let us listen to those who deliver God's messages and grant us the love and courage of Joseph, that we may be open to your prompting and witness, with him, to your loving purposes for all people and all creation.

Help us to be like Joseph and make us warm to the potential in others, and give them safe space to birth and to grow into the fullness of their God-given lives.

We pray today for families of all kinds, but especially for fathers and mothers to be - those who are expecting their own children, those who are fostering or adopting children, and those who are becoming step-parents - as they wonder about their new roles and responsibilities and whether they will cope. We hold before you their hopes and fears, the anticipation of pain and heartache and the expectation of joy. May they find reassurance, encouragement and affirmation.

Child of Bethlehem, Immanuel, you are with us.

As the Holy Family had to seek shelter in strange places, we pray today for all who seek shelter in our community today. We think of those who are homeless and living on the streets of this city and many other cities, and those who are cramped into unsuitable temporary accommodation. We pray especially for organisations who are seeking to help to provide shelter and warmth and care - for Shelter, the Salvation Army, the St Martin's, and Hope into Action.

We pray too for those who are fleeing their homes for safety and find themselves living in refugee camps, and for those who are not able to escape from conflict and daily face danger. We think especially of the people of Afghanistan at this time.

Loving God, we pray today for those known to us who are ill, for those coping with pain or fearing the worst and for those caring for loved ones. We also remember those who grieve the loss of loved ones this Christmas time, and those whose memory of family Christmas is one of pain and sadness. Wrap them in your love and wipe away their tears.

Bernard and family

George Gray and family

Child of Bethlehem, Immanuel, hear our prayers. We rest our hopes on you, for in you alone lies our hope and salvation. Child of Bethlehem, Saviour of the world, you show us the way to the Father, so we say together: Our Father

Advent carol: R&S 138 [Come thou long expected Jesus](#)

Holy Communion

Advent carol: [Long ago prophets knew](#)

The blessing