

Sunday 20th of December 2020

Luke 1:26-38 (The promised birth) Advent 4

Sermon by Andrew Griffiths - Prayers by Hazel Willson

Hi, my name is Andrew and thanks for downloading the talk for St John's church for Sunday 20 December. I will be reading from Luke 1:24-38, giving a short talk and then Hazel will be leading our prayers, before we end.

This is the last Sunday of Advent – Christmas is nearly here!

We have our Carol service later today, I hope you've all had lots of mince pies and have bought your presents.

Advent is a time of waiting and hoping, and I thought I'd start with a quote from a German theologian – no not Luther, but someone called Juergen Moltmann:

Hope is more than feeling. Hope is more than experience. Hope is more than foresight. Hope is a command. Obeying it means life, survival, endurance, standing up to life until death is swallowed up in victory.

That is what we remember at advent, so let's reflect on what it means for us to await the coming Kingdom of God

Reading: Luke 1:24-38

The birth of Jesus foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² 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, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

³⁴ 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

³⁵ 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 [\[b\]](#) the Son of God. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.'

³⁸ 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.

Talk

There once was a man, a really godly man, who decided to become a priest – he was definitely the sort of person who became a priest, so it wasn't long before he was ministering and serving God that way. He married a lovely young woman and they decided that they would like to have children. But the years went past and his wife did not become pregnant – they did everything they could, saw all the right medical people, and sadly they came to the conclusion that they just could not have children. Yet, the man continued serving faithfully, he was loved and respected, and eventually became pretty senior. He and his wife grew old – he retired, but continued to serve his community. Then one day, he had a word from the Lord. At the time he was at the altar, can you believe it, when he heard God speak to him and tell him that he and his wife were going to have a baby.

What?! The man simply didn't believe it – he and his wife were old people. Surely he had misheard? Nope – he and his wife were going to have a baby! But the man, despite years of faithfully serving, had not believed that God could do such wonderful thing. So, until the baby was born, he could not speak – he had told people of the wonderful things God could do, but when God had done one of those things to him, his reaction was scepticism and mistrust.

The irony is not lost on him – when he didn't fully believe, even if he thought he did, he could preach of the faithfulness of God, but the moment the scales came off and he saw the amazing power and faithfulness of God, he could not tell anyone. He was a priest, he was an experienced man, he had seen God work powerfully; yet he reacted with scepticism. True story.

Compare this story to the story in our passage this morning. Where our man was old, experienced and had the advantage of being a priest – Mary was a young woman (probably only just a teenager), who had little experience, no training or learning, and was told an even more incredible thing that God was going to do for and with her. And yet her response was faith.

Compare these stories because that is what Luke wants to you to do. Our man, if you haven't worked it out, is Zechariah – and I've paraphrased the passage that precedes ours this morning.

His wife is Elizabeth, and the child they go on to have is John the Baptist. Luke carefully lays out these contrasting stories. Where one had all the advantages, yet whose faith is less than the disadvantaged teenager. Zechariah had asked for a child, prayed for a child with his wife. It was what they wanted, and yet Zechariah did not believe it had come true. Zechariah was told something that didn't even mean he had to do anything – it was his wife who would bear the son.

Mary had not prayed for a child, she was not even yet married. She was told something that would be both socially and physically very dangerous for her. She would have a child out of wedlock and give birth in very dangerous circumstances with no medical help We are told

that Joseph, her husband to be, was going to divorce her because of it, until an angel intervened. And maternal mortality was very high 2000 years ago, more so if you gave birth in a stable.

Alex received help from midwives, doctors, had scans, got free Vitamin D supplements to keep healthy, all kinds of other things, but Mary had none of these.

Yet Mary reacted with grace and faith, verse 38: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." She had just been told that she, a virgin, not long herself out of childhood, was not only going to have a child, but that that child would be the Son of God, the Messiah.

Alex and I are right in the middle of a lesson in how much work it is to bring up a child – imagine the responsibility of knowing that that child will grow up to save the world?! Mary was told that she would be the fulfilment of the prophesy in Isaiah 7:14, that 'The Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.' She is even given the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy. And her response is faith; faith that, as Gabriel says in our passage 'no word of God will ever fail'.

The Christmas story, the Christian story, begins with the act of simple trust from a young woman. It begins with her hearing the impossible will happen through her, and trusting that it will. Jesus came into this world through this act of faith.

What can we learn from this? How do we become more like Mary and less like Zechariah? Let's look at the great comparisons of who they were. Zechariah was a man, in a society that (sadly not unlike ours) said that men knew best. Mary was a young woman, a virgin even, who would have been patronised her whole life. Zechariah was old, full of experience and knowledge. Mary was young, with little experience. Zechariah was a priest, learned and trained. It is extremely unlikely that Mary would have had any education.

Yet it was Mary who showed wisdom and who faithfully did the right thing. We read in Acts 1:14 that Mary was with the first Christians, in the upper room, just after Jesus had ascended into heaven, praying – she remained faithful even after she had seen her son die on the cross, because she knew that no word of God can ever fail.

You may feel like you are unworthy, that you don't know all the right things, that you don't have the experience or understanding, but those are the things that the world looks for. God, as we see in our passage, looks for faith – trust in God is not dependent on our knowledge or station, it is dependent on the recognition that compared to God none of us have a claim to superiority.

You don't have to be a vicar to be a servant of God. You don't have to do a degree in theology, or train as an evangelist. You don't have to be a white, privileged man. You don't have to be old and experienced; or young and energetic. You just have to be you – God wants you; you have a role to play in God's kingdom.

God can, and does, call you to serve him – he wants you to faithfully follow him wherever He calls you. That doesn't mean you follow anything that claims to be God's word – you test it and you pray.

Mary was visited by the Archangel Gabriel – I'm not saying you should only trust that God is calling you for something if the Archangel Gabriel asks you, but I am saying that it was pretty obvious to Mary that God had called her to a special mission. But when you know, trust in God. Because God's word cannot fail.

We're fast approaching Christmas – probably the weirdest Christmas any of us can ever remember. As we started the run up to Christmas, the season of Advent, I said that we should approach it with expectation. Advent is the time of waiting and hoping for the revelation of God's power. That revelation came in the form of Jesus Christ. And when Mary heard of the role she was going to play in this amazing revelation, she reacted with faith.

As we live in expectation of God's full revelation – let's commit to reacting with faith to whatever role God calls us to play in sharing and growing his kingdom. And remember this:

Where Mary reacted with faith, Zechariah reacted with scepticism. And that is why Zechariah does not have a candle in the advent wreath.

Let's pray

Lord, we thank you for the amazing fact that you call us to serve you
You call us, despite our failings and our failures
You call us, even those who seem to the world like they have little to offer
We pray that when you call us to follow you
However hard it may be
However impossible we might feel it is
That we will respond with faith
Just as Mary did, that first Christmas
Amen

And now Hazel will continue in our prayer.

Prayers

'Christ, be our light, shine in our hearts, shine through the darkness;
Christ, be our light, shine in Your church, gathered today'

Father – we come into the light of Your presence, to claim Your promise that if we will humble ourselves, and pray, and turn from our wicked ways – then You will hear, forgive, and heal our land. We come, often in confusion and doubt, but also with trust, to ask Your guidance for ourselves and our troubled world. As God's people entered the promised land they were told, 'God will show you the way....even though you have never been this way before'. We remember that Jesus is the way, the truth and life. He is truly the Light that overcomes darkness.

‘Longing for light, we wait in darkness, longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people, light for the world to see’.

Father, we pray for all in darkness because of the virus and its many effects. We ask for truth and openness from politicians, scientists and economists. May your church throughout the world be bold to stand for righteousness and justice; and Father, we pray that You will bring a speedy end to this pandemic.

Longing for peace, our world is troubled; longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us, make us your living voice’

Father – we pray for all areas of conflict, hatred and injustice, and that those in despair may know Your hope. Speak, we pray, through the muddle that is Brexit, and bring a just solution. Give to Your suffering church hope in Your promise that You will never forsake them; and give to all who speak in Your name courage and boldness to be Your voices in the wilderness.

‘Longing for food, many are hungry; longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others; shared until all are fed’

Father – we pray for the physically and spiritually hungry and thirsty of this world:

for those affected by climate change, drought or flooding – Give us a determination to make a difference in whatever way we can. Help us to care, and to give, for people will not care what we believe until they believe that we care. Thank you for CAP, for the Food Bank, for Living Well; and all those who volunteer in any way to help. Make us willing to offer ourselves, for all we need is availability, humility, and a willingness to do Your will, as Mary did.

‘Longing for shelter, many are homeless; longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others; walls made of living stone’

Father – we pray for those on our streets in winter weather, and pray that enough night shelters are available. But those who are out of fellowship with others will also feel the cold of isolation, loneliness and grief. For all who suffer give us eyes to see and hearts to love. Father, thank you for your amazing provision of money towards a new boiler, so that St John’s may be physically warm when we are able to meet together again. Thank you too for technology to use for services, prayers and social events, to build those living walls and bring us together.

‘Many the gifts, many the people. many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another, making your kingdom come’

Father – we pray for the St John’s family, especially those who are facing challenges of any kind. Be their guardian and guide, and help them remember that nothing is impossible with you. Help us to help others, so that we become a united family, with Christ as our light.

Father, make us, like Mary, humbly accepting your will for us, and as in her song of praise, seeing your kingdom come in revolution and power – turning the world upside down.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name. **Amen**

Now as a Jesus taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now forever and ever. Amen.**

Thank you for listening and God bless.