

SERMON – 6 December 2015

Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Background of the Reading

The background of this passage is, in a way, an introduction to all the readings we are going to have over the next few Sundays.

First of all I would like you to close your eyes for a minute or two and remove yourselves to another country where the maximum temperature is not minus 1 but 30 degrees Celsius! I also would like to add: do not think of a snow-white picture when you imagine the first Christmas!

It was a totally different world dominated by a different set of values and customs. It was unheard of anything good to come from a place like Nazareth in the province of Galilee. Why? Well because the population was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles and the Jews in the south regarded the Gentiles as unclean and not worthy to come into the presence of God. Nazareth was an insignificant village which has never been mentioned before, not in the Old Testament or in any other Jewish writing. Nazareth is situated among the southern ridges of Lebanon, on the steep slope of a hill, about 14 miles from the Sea of Galilee and about 6 miles west from Mount Tabor.

Previously, Luke told his listeners that the angel of the Lord appeared in the temple to a priest called Zechariah. This would have been a much more likely thing to be happening, an angel visiting a priest. But in our reading I think it really took the first listeners by surprise. It was unheard of in that society of an angel of the Lord, who in this case was Gabriel in comparison to an “unnamed” angel previously, appearing and speaking to a young unmarried virgin who had no status at all. He appeared to her in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. In Judaism, “virgins” were young maidens, usually fourteen or younger. Although Judaism had developed quite a list of angelic names, the New Testament mentions only the two who also appear in the Old Testament: Gabriel and Michael. They became the two most popular angels, of which Gabriel was sent on many divine missions.

But more shockingly is the greeting. Neither the title (“favoured” or “graced one”) nor the promise (“The Lord is with you”) was traditional in greetings, even had she been a person of status. “Do not fear” was also common in Old Testament revelations. Mary here joins the list of those in the Bible who found favour before God like Noah and Moses. The angel said to her that she will become the mother of son who will be identified with the “Mighty God” and who will have an eternal kingdom.

To her reaction that she is still a virgin, meaning that she does not have a bad reputation in her village, Gabriel says the Lord will overshadow her like He did a

long time ago in Egypt when He went ahead of them in a cloud! Jewish tradition used the language of “overshadowing” for God’s presence with his people. And just in case she was wondering if this is really happening to her, Gabriel informs her that her elderly aunt Elizabeth, like Sarah in the Old Testament, is also already in her sixth month carrying a baby. Mary did not know because in those days they did not have phones, mobile phones or the internet. This must have been confirmation to Mary that, to God, anything is possible - something Sarah in the Old Testament was not so sure of!

Then another surprise: against all the odds of her situation, Mary expresses her submission to the Lord’s will in regular Old Testament terms of obedience.

Amen

Reflection

Advent is about waiting and preparing. Last Saturday evening with the rain pouring down, we visited the German market in Edinburgh. And it was no fun and games. We were completely drenched. And to make matters worse, we rushed to catch the tram heading out of Princes Street, to see it going past us. We had to wait in the rain for the next tram. You hurry to find the tram and then you still wait for ages for the tram to come.

It was then that I realised what waiting really means, waiting for the next tram to arrive, looking out onto the busy road to see if the tram is coming and, when it comes, the excitement to know it is finally here. The wonderful feeling that we will be dry again!

And then it dawned on me. But that is exactly the meaning of Advent –looking ahead into the future and waiting!

Advent is about a journey of waiting for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Advent is about thinking of Mary as she waited on the revelation of God to become a reality! It is about you and me in our journey of faith. It is about our preparedness of being servants of Jesus Christ.

It is about thinking of what it really means to be a servant of the Most High God. It is about sacrifice and commitment to walk a path that is really not easy at all. Following Jesus Christ is a life-changing event that will ask everything of us, just like it did of Mary.

We must be able to say, show and confess this Season of Advent that we will, too, be true servants of Jesus Christ, like Mary. And just like Mary bear the price. Against all the odds Mary said “Yes” to the Lord. She was unmarried. Joseph could shame her in public and end their relationship. She could have been rejected by her father and her community. But she persevered and trusted. She had faith in the Lord’s ability to be in control. She trusted the Lord God.

Maybe that is exactly what we must do as well while we wait. Trusting, having faith in the Lord, hoping while we journey with Him. Maybe our focus this Advent must be to show the world what it means to be a true follower of Jesus:

- A follower of Jesus is not someone who only speaks of love and forgiveness but shows it;
- A follower of Jesus is not someone that **only** speaks of God this time of the year while forgetting about Him the rest of the year;
- A follower of Jesus is not someone who is **only** buying presents and preparing for all the festivities but also someone who is concerned about spreading the Good news of the celebration of the coming of our Lord and Saviour;
- A follower of Jesus is not someone who speaks of prayer but actually prays to God on a regular basis;
- A follower of Jesus is not someone who is perfect but someone who is faithful and holding on to God;
- A follower of Jesus is not someone who has life easy but having a hard life and still praising God;
- A follower of Jesus is someone who cannae wait to tell everyone the Good News of the coming of our lord and Saviour!

So what are we waiting for? Let us all go and practise the words of the well-known hymn:

“Go down to the city, into the street
and let’s give the message to the people we meet.
So light up the fire and let the flame burn,
Open your door, let Jesus return.
Take seeds of His Spirit, let the fruit grow
Tell the people of Jesus, let his love show!

Amen