

Advent 4 2014 – The Woman who said ‘No’

We will all have, and I daresay enjoy, the tinsel and the wrappings. But to some of that I want to say, "Humbug". Christmas also addresses darkness and doom.

In today's scripture there are very different stories about very different people. David and Mary. David the shepherd boy turned king. Having lived an unpredictable and dangerous life living in caves and on the run, he is now secure on his throne and in his own house. And he assumes that God would like a house too. But is David's preparation an attempt to domesticate God - as we have domesticated Christmas? Mary's preparation, on the other hand, is filled with insecurity and danger. Is about the unknown and unpredictable. It is about being pregnant.

I don't know about being pregnant. The dangers, the change, the anxiety, the waiting. But the most powerful icon in Advent is probably a pregnant woman. Like her we should be the bearers of new life. Like her, we did not make it happen on our own. Like her we grow beyond our normal bounds. Like her we are filled with awe and fear and deep joy. Like her we lose control and, like her, our lives are taken over entirely by someone else.

Christmas is a serious time. There are many for whom there are no 'tidings of comfort and joy', no rest from anxiety. For whom it is not at all a happy time.

There is a video going round on YouTube entitled The Real Meaning of Christmas. Perhaps in reaction to the commercial shots of presents and merry-making. It starts with a scene of a young couple in their cosy sitting room, on the carpet under the Christmas tree crouching over the cot of a small baby. The scene fades and shifts until the background is more sparse, turning into wooden walls, an earthen floor and the baby in a trough filled with hay. But the Real meaning of Christmas is not about the family, except in a very narrow sense, it is not about couples and children and fairy lights. It is about risk and journeys and blood and flesh.

Because it is, for some, a time of hurt and regret and sadness- those without families- for whatever reason; separation - of whatever kind, a dark time of the year. The Christian message is not about families - except inasmuch as it is about Love. and Love hurts. Love is dangerous and can cause a lot of pain. In fact unless you are prepared to suffer, don't contemplate love. It is a risky business. Joseph took that risk in his love for Mary. Mary took a risk and suffered for love of Jesus. God took a risk ... at Bethlehem.

Mary, the demure young woman in the blue frock is usually praised as the one who says, "Yes." Yes, in obedience to God. But I want today to talk about Mary as the woman who (fist raised in defiance) says, "No!" By becoming the bearer of what Romans calls "the mystery kept secret" she sings that her soul magnifies the Lord in saying No - to strength, No to the proud who she wishes were scattered, No to the mighty, who should be cast down and No to the rich - send them away empty.

No to the violence and hurt, to the pride of position and exploitation of wealth, No to the government that demanded they are registered so as not to avoid tax, No to the accumulation of wealth that leaves others in the mystery of poverty. I was interested in BBC news yesterday about a Tory MP who challenged the Oxfam poster (a tweet) "A Perfect Storm" saying that with, zero hour contracts, benefit cuts and childcare costs, that Britain is in trouble. Mary says no to maiming, madness, bereavement and economic insecurity that poisons our sorrows as well as our joys.

The physical dangers of childbirth are, of course, still faced by the majority of women in the world. And into this God comes. Something we don't always appreciate. Perhaps something we hadn't counted on or may not want. Something given. There is a carol about God looking at the world through a baby's eyes. Think of how a baby learns to focus and recognise all that is around. Think of how a mother looks at her child and how the child looks back. Was this how God came to see us? Do we have eyes to see the world into which Christ came?

In the story, Mary has only one question, and that is a real clue to her nature. She does not demand that she knows what God is hoping to achieve. She does not ask what it will cost. She does not preen and look for praise because God is asking her to do this. All she asks is, "Am I not a bit of a problem? Are you sure that I fulfill your requirements?" as many do who are truly called by God. And when the angel says, 'That is all taken care of', then Mary says, "Yes.... Fine."

Faith walks simply, childlike between the darkness of human life and the hope of what is to come. Here is Mary, full of grace, who offered up her heart to God, whose emptiness allowed space for God to be born, whose watchfulness allowed God's call to be heard, who made of herself a dwelling for God. In Mary's world, where women could not bear witness, God invited her to witness in her own flesh and blood. In our world, despite the darkness and noise of war, poverty, disease and injustice, we are called to the same witness, to saying "No" to what is wrong, to the same emptiness, the same awareness, so that, as the Mystics say, 'we too might become pregnant with the life of God.'

Even now, when the world seems dark and doomed, the seed of God's life is growing and a child is stirring in the womb.

God bless us, every one