

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Fourth Sunday of Advent – 20th December 2020

Canon David Pickering

'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word.'

This morning, we had a choice: either to read the set psalm or to use a Canticle Psalm - the Magnificat. So today we heard the wonderful Stanford setting in G, sung by a girl soloist from the choir of Salisbury Cathedral. His use of the clear young voice, rising above the rest of the singers, is so effective because this is, after all, the Song of Mary. So today we have a timely opportunity to reflect on her moving and symbolic words. They don't actually form part of our Gospel reading for today: to hear the words of the Magnificat from Luke we'll have to wait until the Sunday before Christmas next year in our three-year cycle of readings.

But Mary does have some important and moving words in our Gospel passage today and in many ways what she has to say to the angel is quite different in tone to the words we find in the Magnificat. The canticle has many parallels with the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2.1-10, when she brings the young Samuel to the priest Eli at the temple. These two texts have a number of similar phrases and both use a poetic format. But in today's gospel passage we have a down-to-earth dialogue. As Mary responds to the angel her words seem to flow directly from her heart. The passage creates a wonderful story and, I hope, offers a message for all of us.

Mary is "perplexed" and perhaps not a little afraid at the appearance and greeting of the angel. Who wouldn't be? Then things grow even more puzzling for her. She is to have a baby, a totally unexpected child. From this encounter with the angel comes the idea of the virgin birth of Jesus, yet what is perhaps more important for us to focus upon here is that Mary is being asked to play an essential part in something thought by human minds to be impossible. Yet through the power of the Holy Spirit, all things *are* possible with God. From this 'impossible' birth will come one who, "*will be great....Son of the Most High.....on the throne of Davidreign over the house of Jacob...his kingdom will have no end.*" He will be the 'Special One.'

So how does Mary respond.? The answer lies in the final verse of our gospel reading - the text I chose to open this reflection: *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your*

word. Mary responds with humble faith and obedience. With faith: *Here am I, the servant of the Lord*, and with obedience: *let it be according to your word*.

In today's New Testament reading, St Paul closes his farewell doxology in his letter to the Romans with the words, *to bring about obedience of faith*. In many ways obedience and faith are as good as dead if they try to stand alone. They are inextricably intertwined.

By her faith, Mary confessed that she was the *the servant of the Lord*, and in obedience, she would *let it be according to (God's) word*, so accepting what she was called to do and be. True faith needs obedience. Without it, faith is empty, even vain - a hollow profession of beliefs offering little more than lip service to a creed. In fact, obedience that is not born of true faith can be a burden and a struggle, for faith calls us to obedient action in our lives, even among what may seem to be the impossible demands of our contemporary world.

If we believe God will bring us through the present Covid pandemic, we can't simply sit back and wait for it to be sorted out by others. Our faith calls us to obediently act, with responsibility and in a caring manner. If we believe we can overcome the challenges of climate change, then we must, in obedience, take the appropriate actions in the way we live our lives and use the finite resources of the planet. If we believe the hungry of our world should be fed, that everyone should be adequately housed and employed, then we need to work for a more equitable way of re-ordering the economic systems of this present world. If we believe there can be an end to the violence that overshadows so many people's lives, then we are called to work for real justice in our world at all levels.

As we ponder in our own hearts what God may be calling us to do, we might reflect on some of Mary's words in the Magnificat:

*He has brought down the powerful
from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with
good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

Amen.