

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon**

**4<sup>th</sup> December 2022**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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The countdown to Christmas has begun. Yet it is not too late to get Christmas right this year!

There are people who start planning for Christmas quite early and spend Advent, and even some time before that, busily writing cards, decorating the house and the tree, baking, buying presents, organising Christmas dinners and entertainment – and then, perhaps, comes the moment when they realise, in bewilderment, that life doesn't go according to plan.

If you are one of them, I dare you to imagine a different way of preparing for Christmas ... next year. One that cannot be rushed. Advent unfolds as it unfolds, Christmas comes when it comes –stop rushing and let something within each of us unfold slowly. These days, this is so foreign to many of our expectations.

This is how the story of the birth of Jesus unfolded – a story about the arrival of something foreign to people's expectations, a story of surprising and unexpected events, of lives that didn't go according to plan: God entered the world and changed humankind forever.

God came to a humble girl and chose her to be Christ's mother. God came to a humble carpenter and asked him to offer life-long protection to mother and child. It is a story about a twin "yes" to God.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we honour Mary and rejoice in her "yes" to God, a response that came from the heart of all she was. For the faithful, Mary is the God-bearer, a symbol of meekness – and a symbol of strength, at the same

time. To God, Mary is the favoured one. The Lord is with her before she is asked to bear the Christ, and before she agrees.

Today we can also give thanks for the determined obedience of Joseph. Indeed, every third year, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, the lectionary – that is, the listing of Scripture readings appointed for worship on a given day or occasion – turns the spotlight away from the Virgin, and brings Joseph, her would-be husband, to centre-stage. If we are tempted to side-line Joseph as a minor character in the Christmas narrative, the Gospel of Matthew reminds us that, in fact, Joseph's role in Jesus's arrival is pivotal. A carpenter, an unassuming descendant of King David. Betrothed to Mary, when the story begins, he probably was making plans for the wedding and their life together.

And then, Matthew tells us, Joseph learns to his cost that life doesn't go according to plan. Mary is found to be with child. A few words, yet what human drama and turmoil they hint at. Joseph knows for sure that he is not the father. His expectations are shattered. "What's to be done about Mary?", as a contemporary Christmas song says.

Joseph has no good options to choose from. If he calls attention to Mary's supposed infidelity, she will be stoned to death, as Levitical law proscribes. If he divorces her quietly, she might be reduced to begging or, worse, to prostitution, to support herself and the child.

Matthew doesn't go into much detail about Joseph's turmoil. However, in a text from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century which wasn't included in the canon of the Scripture, the Protoevangelium of James, we are given a more complex picture of the carpenter's anguish. When learning about Mary's pregnancy, he throws himself on the ground, strikes his own face, and cries bitterly. He wonders how to respond and asks Mary why she has betrayed both him and God.

If we assume that Joseph's acceptance of God's plan came easily, we distort his humanity. God chose him to be Jesus' earthly father, and this led the righteous man into doubt, shame, and scandal. God required Joseph to embrace a complex situation he had not created, to reorder his life, to marry a woman whose story he didn't understand, and protect a baby who was not his son. Yet accepting to do so, Joseph allows God's plan of salvation to unfold.

Mary and Joseph were given the sign of a child whose name is Emmanuel, "God with us". The promise of this child is both comforting and disturbing. After all, what does it mean that God is with us, being a part of our lives?

God is with us. This promise begins Matthew's Gospel and stands again at its conclusion, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28.20). Jesus is the fulfilment of all of God's promises which frame each day of our lives, just as they frame the Gospel.

Mary responded to this sign of Emmanuel with praise, thanksgiving, and grateful joy. We have said together the words of the Magnificat, Mary's Song: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" (Luke 1.46). Mary's testimony to God's faithfulness is not solitary and private - she is conscious that her life is framed in the history of salvation. Thus, she can say: "[The Lord] has mercy on those who fear him, from generation to generation" (Luke 1.50). The Virgin gives a voice to all those redeemed after her "yes", those who in Jesus Christ find the mercy of God.

St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, invites us: "In the heart of each one may Mary praise the Lord, in each may the spirit of Mary rejoice in the Lord; if, according to the flesh, Christ has only one mother, according to faith all souls engender Christ." Not only must we offer Christ a dwelling in our souls and in our lives, but we must take him to the world, so that we too might engender Christ for our times.

The name of the Christ child is Emmanuel, "God with us". The story cannot unfold without Mary and Joseph. The story cannot unfold without us. God calls us into his story. There's no way out.

As we prepare for Christmas and to receive this child, we might ask what happens when God bursts into our nicely laid plans and decisions? To be open to this story means to accept to live, like Mary and Joseph, in "a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)" as the poet T. S. Eliot has put it (*Four Quartets*). A condition of complete simplicity that brings true freedom and the priceless gift of God's salvation.

It is not too late to get Christmas right this year! It all depends on God's gift of Emmanuel. So let us remember to look always for God's presence in our midst: in acts of kindness and generosity, in self-giving and forgiveness, in the sense of peace that can come in anxiety or grief – and let us also read or sing Mary's prayer, allowing our souls to magnify the Lord, so that we can grow in the fullness of God with us.

At the end of our service, as we turn towards Christmas, we will sing one of the most loved carols, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”. Whether you sing it or just listen to it over the next days and weeks, make this your prayer:

“[...] Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in,  
Be born to us today. [...]  
O come to us, abide with us  
Our Lord Emmanuel.”

Amen.