

24/12/17 - The work of Christmas

God of light and hope; of stars and surprises: open our eyes to your glory and our hearts to your presence, that we may respond with joy to the angel song; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Greetings to you, favoured ones! The Lord is with you.

This is what we hear the angel Gabriel announced to Mary when he appeared to her in today's Gospel. A simple enough beginning. Not quite once upon a time, but pretty much like Good morning, good to see you, hope you are well. In other words a simple greeting to a young woman, designed to reassure and to calm. Calm? How calm would you be if the angel Gabriel appeared and said to you: Morning, everything OK? When we first meet someone all our senses are on high alert. We drink in through our ears and our eyes - every sense is touched as we try to make sense of this new person - is this a friend? or someone to be feared? If I met the angel Gabriel today, I think I would be transfixed. probably unable to speak or move. Overawed by the light and power of the angel as we know him through the Bible.

We believe Mary was a pretty bright young woman, and a very devout one, but she was clearly more in touch with the spiritual world than I, because she neither froze nor was unable to speak. She replied to the angel, just as if this was an extraordinary but not earth-shattering event. yet earth-shattering it certainly was. The angel takes just four little Bible verses to tell her of a cataclysmic event and the story of salvation through her yet to be born Son. So let's suppose, here he is, this angel, foretelling not your horoscope but your personal future and everyone's ultimate future. In four verses. You are about to have a son, never mind how. and here's what his name is, and God will make him king over your people, and his kingdom will never end. This is amazing stuff. I think we would be a little stupefied? Maybe think this angel was a little mad and his announcement a bit crazy?

But now Mary, she is neither stupefied nor disbelieving. She doesn't contradict the angel (or perhaps Zechariah's fate of being struck dumb might have overcome her). And she doesn't stand rooted to the spot (which is probably what would happen to me). She manages to listen to all the angel says, picks out a key point and questions how this will happen. Not because she disbelieves, but because she wants to know.

At this point I find it hard not to reflect on the attitude of some of my students in university lectures - I am no angel. I certainly don't frighten them in the slightest, but I might as well be a being from outer space because they behave so often as if transfixed, struck dumb, neither listening nor questioning as I would love them to.

But Mary - she listened. she questioned and she received her answer. The holy spirit will come upon you. Nothing will be impossible with God. There are so many possible reactions we might imagine at this point. But Mary does none of them. She does the most surprising thing of all - she accepts. She opens her heart and lets God in.

Why should we find this surprising? I think because people today don't do this. Being open is discouraged. We are surrounded by scare stories of what happens when we are open about our lives and our feelings. If we leave our doors open, people will steal from us. Scary trolls from social media will say terrible things about you. The media will sacrifice you. People will laugh at you. No-one will like you any more. Much better just to work out how to stay private and survive in dark caves of our own making; staying mute when blasphemy surrounds us, staying quiet when people have no homes

and no food in our own towns, staying safe while people are chased with bombs and wounded and raped by their compatriots in countries we believe and hope are too far away to hurt us.

How can we be open in these circumstances? How can we really let God into our hearts? Wont we get hurt? Wont he want us to do things which are just too hard? Wont people think we are crazy? like angels who come and give messages of salvation?

OK. No-one here is being asked to turn into John the Baptist and wear camel hair and eat locusts. No-one is asked to have a baby in a rather uncomfortable place and then get on a donkey and travel many miles to another country. Jesus is not even asking us to walk about every day praising God and converting people to our way of worship. He is just asking us to be open. He is asking us to be the mother of God.

When Mary stood there and accepted her future role from the angel, she opened herself and her future life to God. She became the mother of God - in her case this was a physical thing. In our case it is more of a spiritual thing. All we have to do is be open to God and let him into our hearts. Let him be born in us, as doubtless we will sing tomorrow. In the words of O little town of Bethlehem we sing:

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today.

If Jesus is to be born in us, we must become mothers of God. we must be open. Open to let the power of the holy spirit come upon us. So let us ask Mary's question here: how can this be?

In our world, to be open is to take risks. And they are not all difficult or frightening ones. We should be open to wonder, we should be open to gratitude and we should be open to justice.

Open to wonder that after 2000 years we still shed tears at the birth of Christ into the world. that he made us, he loved us, every one of us and made us his adopted children. Look through a child's eyes with wonder at everything around us - the wonder of the sky, the earth, the diversity and complexity of life, the universe, however limited our understanding of it. That is the openness which drives us to protect and sustain our resources, to care about our surroundings, to look after our churches and homes, to be good guardians during our time here.

Open to gratitude, for our own lives, our families, our friends, our colleagues, our ministers and leaders. for the nature of relationship taught to us by God in Trinity. for the kindness of strangers and all that we share in common through Jesus' love. That is the openness which drives us to care for each other, to build our Benefice on common ground, to demonstrate to the world, and our communities of and around Heathfield, that we are Christians who care and do not quarrel, but come together in praise of our God.

Open to justice, staying aware and informed of what is going on in our community, our country and our world. Looking out of those dark caves I mentioned. That is the openness which drives us to speak out about injustice, to influence those with power to talk rather than fight, to show generosity rather than belligerence, to take painful steps towards peace rather than taking up immovable positions.

Open to wonder, open to gratitude, open to justice:

Openness like Mary's to accept God, to let him be born in us this Christmas; and being changed for

ever by letting him in to our hearts and our lives. God needs to be born, not just of Mary in the past, but of us today. What is the point of the Christmas story unless we are changed by God? Not spectators at the crib, but players in the Christian team, workers in a Christian world. Like Mary, we can choose to accept or reject this invitation to work for Christmas. Working for Christmas neither pays us money nor wears us out at the end of the day. Working for Christmas is just a matter of being open to God, for things to change in his own time, and for us, in our small ways to contribute. Let us not be transfixed, hiding in our dark caves from the light of Christ. Let us not be mute in the face of the angel's Christmas message.

I am going to close this talk with a short poem, adapted from Howard Thurman.

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among all peoples,
to make a little music with the heart...

And to be open to the wonder, the gratitude and the justice of Christ
That way, the work of Christmas begins.”
Amen

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[Return to home page](#)