Advent 4 – Luke 1: 39-55

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

The angel Gabriel leaves, and Mary runs. ‘With haste,’ the Gospel writer tells us on this fourth Sunday in Advent. Note that the pink/rose candle was lit last week, not for Mary in the pink for a girl sense, but for John the Baptist. Mary gets the last of our purple candles today.

So, off Mary runs: a newly pregnant teenager making for the hills, still slender in such early stages, running until she reaches the home of Elizabeth, her also-pregnant cousin.

This story is one of the rare narratives in the Bible that is entirely female-centred. (The priest Zechariah — Elizabeth's husband, and the man-nominally-in-charge — is literally silenced throughout.) I remind people that there are many many women in leadership roles, and among the disciples, but this is a bit different: and it allows us to see the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, as a whole person, without either sentimentality or cynicism.

The Church has tended, over the years, to bury Mary so deep under layers of piety and theology, and indeed politics, that it is hard to dig her back out. Was she a child prophet? A model of deeply holy femininity? Sinless and a virgin? Or a victim of divine manipulation? If she had said No to God, who would have said Yes? And how many would have had to be asked?

So would the real Mary please stand up? Actually, I think she did, if only we are willing to see it. Now in Year C of the Church’s 3-year lectionary cycle, we focus on Luke’s version of these stories as far as possible, and Luke's account of the Visitation shows us a portrait of Mary that cuts through most of our assumptions and stereotypes. A portrait that balances fear and courage, doubt and faith, vulnerability and immense strength. And in so doing, it shows us what we, the Church, might become at our very best.

I am always at pains to tell the children that we don’t know how many kings came to visit Jesus; we only know three gifts that are named in the Bible telling. But it struck me that Mary brings gifts too. Teaching literacy to primary school children, we learned the Rule of Three – think of things like tall, dark and handsome or Game, set and match, or something – they are comfortable and pleasing to our ears. So maybe there are three gifts that Mary brings to us:

The gift of relationship: as soon as Mary says ‘yes’ to Gabriel's ridiculous request, she rushes off to see Elizabeth. She doesn't isolate herself. She doesn't keep God's revelation a secret. She doesn’t attempt to go it alone. Instead, she seeks out a fellow-traveller in her cousin, a woman rejoicing in her own unexpected pregnancy. Tradition tells us that Mary is only in her mid-teens when the angel Gabriel appears to her, and in that cultural and religious context, her pregnancy is a scandal. At best, she is going to be an object of malicious gossip; at worst, she runs the risk of death by stoning. So it is no mean feat to have said ‘yes’ – let’s not underestimate Mary’s agreement. How many of us would have ducked out…. She needs someone right now who will recognize and celebrate God working in her life. Someone who will receive the news, not reject it. And that non-judgemental receiving of ‘stuff’ is the church’s job description. Show welcome and love for whatever people are going through – no gossip, no judging, just showing love for human life in all its messiness.

Second, there is the gift of blessing: Luke doesn’t dress the story up and it is quite brief. But if this were Lauren from Kelvedon Hatch, engaged to Kieran, would she say yes quite so readily? And would we, Lauren’s friends and family, be ok with her story? So many possibilities for doubting her word…. We might be more likely to commit her to a secure mental health institution than let her get on with it. But she says, however confused and perplexed she might be feeling, yes. And into this maelstrom of questions comes an outpouring of blessing: Blessed are you among women, Elizabeth tells Mary, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Elizabeth joins the dots in Mary's story; she makes the connection between trust and blessing. In Elizabeth's mind, Mary's ‘favoured’ status has nothing to do with health, wealth, comfort or anything else. Her blessing lies purely in her willingness to trust God and to surrender to God's calling. To rely on God's promises and believe that they will sustain her, no matter what.

We don't live in a time or a culture that encourages us to bless one another, and that is a huge shame. And what does that mean anyway? It involves being spiritually attentive; looking for glimpses of God in another person. How much would change if we in our churches made a point of naming those divine gifts we see in one another?

And finally and most obviously, the gift of hope: once Mary has both relationship and blessing, she finds her prophetic voice, the voice the Church needs most at the moment. This is what we now call the Magnificat – Mary’s song – My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. Which is good in itself, but then it gets positively subversive – it is a radical song full of hope that God is for all those who are down-trodden, poor, broken-hearted. It is a song so subversive, so political, that William Temple, a previous archbishop of Canterbury, declared that it wasn’t to be used in worship; too inflammatory. Funny, that – nowadays, it is used daily in the Offices, the regular services of the church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it: at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings.... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is a hard, strong song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. A political song. A song about a God invested in revolutionary change for his creation. A song about a reality in which our sinful and unjust status quo is reversed: the proud are scattered and the humble honoured. The hungry are fed and the rich sent away. The powerful are brought down, and the lowly are lifted up. Mary describes a world characterized by love and justice; a world that only the Christ-child she carries in her womb can bring into being.

When the British ruled India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in churches. Similarly, during the "Dirty War" in Argentina, after the mothers of disappeared children covered the capital plaza with posters showing the words of the Magnificat, the military junta banned all public displays of the song. Too much hope, they decided, is a dangerous thing.

But ‘too much hope’ is exactly what we are called to cultivate and proclaim on this fourth Sunday in Advent. The Messiah is almost here and the promise of his lasting reign changes everything. There is no unjust system, oppressive hierarchy, or arrogant leadership structure that God will not upend. No wall for Mexico then….

We need to find our voice for this day and age, and sing our song. How do we magnify our God and rejoice in Christ the Saviour who is to be born again very soon? **Amen**