

Sermon preached by Fr Christopher Wood
on the Fourth Sunday of Advent 2017
at St John's Timberhill

The Advent wait comes to an abrupt end this year. Indeed today. The fourth week of Advent lasts.....well, until it gets dark. The stage is about to be transformed

As if to prove that everything has to happen somewhere, the tiny and insignificant town of Bethlehem is about to take centre stage in the thoughts and celebrations of people all over the world. The coming, the incarnation of the creator God; the Almighty reaching down into the staggeringly ordinary circumstances of the stable birth, the mystery that St Paul says was hidden to so many generations; that drama is about to unfold before us.

We are waiting for it to begin.

"The meaning is in the waiting" says the priest poet R S Thomas. He may well have been describing the very essence of Advent.

Our Blessed Lady was signified with our Advent candle to-day as the last in such a long line of preparation to make the incredible into a reality. In St Luke's Gospel she has taken her place as the first among the disciples. Why? Because she hears, she accepts and proclaims. She has been overshadowed by the Spirit, the same Spirit that brooded over the creation of the world, and in response to God's will she has said yes. And not just yes. Mary's discipleship is not just of conversion but of constancy. A young and vulnerable woman displaying inspirational faith. She takes action. While Christ, the result of Mary's yes is yet unborn, she, the God bearer as one of her most ancient titles has it, the God bearer will set out to travel to her cousin Elizabeth to proclaim her discipleship and to rejoice. When she could have been at her most frightened and most bewildered she sets out on a journey to share her

overwhelming joy.

It is a faith I wonder at a fresh every year. It is the faith that changed the world.

And so we wait. We wait for God to come into our midst. Yet we know, we know as baptized Christians that he is already in our midst. We know what our vocation is by baptism and can be by participation in the life of "God with us." His love, Himself..... it is on offer in his word, his sacraments, in Holy communion, in all sorts of ways, even encounters with a stranger. He is ready to enter our lives not just at Christmas when we may be at our most sentimental.

He is always ready to enter our lives, and our hearts and our minds. But to allow him in we must respond, and to respond is to be open to change. We must give ourselves, love for love, faith for faith, a real response to the faith that God has in us. We must act like the response of the Virgin Mary. Her faith motivated her actions even before Christ was born as we have heard. If our faith means anything it must lead to action. And our faith encourages us to believe that His Grace will see us through whatever we undertake in His name.

Putting our responsive faith at the centre of our lives and changing our priorities forever. It's worth wrestling with. The saints of the church over 2000 years have that in common. They are those who wrestled with what it meant to put faith in Christ Our Lord at the very centre of their lives. From saints like St Peter to St Maximillian Kolbe and beyond. And the Godless world would see in them men who stood before their own cross, before the door of a gas chamber, or whatever. But they knew that they stood at the gate of eternity and the hand of Christ was reaching out to them. In their end was their beginning.

It's worth contemplating at the silent crib. Looking out over the quiet of the Winter fields of Norfolk. Wherever we find it easiest to turn our thoughts to the one who is waiting for us. It is worth turning away from everything that separates us from our own integrity, from one another, from God, and allowing ourselves to be renewed.

Now is the time because, before the clock strikes Midnight, the beginning is about to come, and in a way the end is already in our midst. We live in an age that can talk the talk, even about spiritual matters and yet so often is only concerned with the God of ME. But in reality our culture seems to have lost touch with God and puts so much of little consequence in the place where God wants to dwell in us. In you, in me.

So, this Christmas, let's do it. Let's overcome all that is unworthy of ourselves and allow the peace that emanates from the manger as from the altar and God's word, to transfigure our lives. And let us Glory with the Angels, the Angels that fill this space, and who glory in God. The God who has put faith in us, and has put hope in us.

Because it is Hope that's at the centre of the Gospel story today. Hope for the future. Two chosen women, Mary and Elizabeth, share in miraculous news and now they are eager to share their hopes for their children and their future and we share in that hope for us and all humanity.

"Let what you have said be done to me" Our Lady's response isn't meek acceptance as far as I can see, its enthusiasm. She believes and therefore she trusts and therefore she has hope. Hope is a very Christian virtue. We must never lose a hold on it, even in the darkest of days. It is our hope in the child in the manger which will lead us to follow him up the hill of Calvary and what we learn on that journey is that our horizon in life is just the limit of our sight. Hope goes beyond that horizon.

That is what Julian meant by repeating “all shall be well.” Like so many chosen by God she too had seen beyond the horizon. The enormity of it all didn’t overwhelm a young woman in a far away place. She drew courage from her faith to journey to a tiny nowhere town made far too pretty on all those Christmas cards, so that she could put her faith to the test and her hand in the hand of God.

Your vocation has been with you since the “yes” of your baptism and if we take time to be still and listen, as Advent concludes before our very eyes, it will be revealed again as Christmas dawns.

And Amen to that.