

## Sermon for Advent 4, Year B

### The Text: Luke 1:26-38

Since the beginning of Advent we've been counting down to Christmas day for a while now. But now the countdown is *really* on—only *[insert number]* more days to go! Children find it so hard to wait patiently without being able to do anything to speed up the process, with all the shimmer and shine of the season—tinsel, tinsel and more tinsel, twinkling lights and decorations in the shops. Crowds rushing everywhere to organise last minute gifts wrapped in bright paper and elegant bows to add to the pile under the Christmas tree, carols in the domain on our TV's, the smell of Christmas baking in our kitchens, the obligatory Santa appearance at community clubs and office party break ups all come together to mark the imminent arrival of Christmas.

But all the twinkles and sparkles and over-indulging and bright wrappings and festive frivolity cannot paper over the bad news stories we hear in the news each week. This magical Christmas experience the West manufactures cannot take away the pain of those who have experienced the depths of tragedy in recent times. Many point to that pain, suffering, tragedy and evil and say that is why Christmas is not real.

But what if suffering and horror was all there is to life? What if the only hope we had to cling to for our existence was something called luck? What if Christmas was just tinsel and ham and pudding and presents? What if Christmas was just holly and candles and baubles and biscuits? What if Christmas was just time with family and friends, and all about a bit of fun for the kids? What if Christmas was just Christmas trees and jolly songs and a rather large man in a red suit and his reindeers pulling a sleigh with a stockpile of gifts? If it was, it would mean nothing other than being able to identify the terminal illness of sin, yet have no escape from it.

These tragic episodes show us that we live in a world that is sinful and broken. Scripture tells us in Jeremiah 17 that "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Jesus teaches in chapter 15 of Matthew's Gospel: "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a person `unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a person `unclean'" (v17-20).

We might ask “Everything's getting so much worse; what's the world coming to?” But the world isn't getting worse. The world's just being the same old world it has always been, determined to tear itself apart, ever since Adam and Eve wanted to be their own authority. So what's even more shocking than the wickedness and corruption that we witness in the news on TV is the news which God's Word confronts us with—that the self-centredness that gives birth to such evil acts around us is inherent in our own hearts in their natural state—hearts which, though now redeemed by Christ, still struggle to (at times even refuse to) forgive and love others.

Today we are given the Good News that we desperately need to hear: “In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary”. The angel went to her and told her: “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus” (verses 26-31).

The name ‘Jesus’ means ‘God saves’. We are counting down to the birth of the Saviour of the world. But we are also counting down to the birth of *our* Saviour too. God made this happen for you and for me. We would all confess that Jesus was born as our Saviour. Even if the majority of Australians and Western world wouldn't, we'd say that's the true meaning of Christmas. But is our confession of faith one we make with our lips *and* our hearts? Is our confession of faith something that gets lost in the hustle and bustle of Christmas preparations, in the tinsel and light? What does it really mean to us that God has rescued us by sending Jesus for us to save us from our death sentence?

On that very first Christmas, God in Christ came in the midst of a brokenness, trouble and filth. The first Christmas was messy. Jesus was born surrounded by animals in a stable with excrement. He came to a manger decorated not with tinsel and lights but with inadequacies, fears and anxieties. God came into the midst of the darkness and pain of the world, and also our own—and he continues to abide with us in it. He came to disrupt humanity's ideas of self-sufficiency and self-rule. He came to save us from it. He came into the very depths of unspeakable evil, darkness and despair. Jesus came to give true hope that God is with His faithful people even in their failings and even when they suffer for doing what is right and good. Mary knew this—and she rejoiced. After Gabriel explains to Mary how the conception and birth of the Saviour will unfold, Mary declares: “I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.” In doing so Mary trusts God's word of promise to her. In direct contrast to the Eve of the Garden of Eden, Mary shows her faith in and faithfulness to the word of God. She submits to the word that at first deeply troubled her. She shows herself to be the new Eve; the woman who does trust God's word and desire it above all else. She sings in jubilant praise our Psalm for today.

Today's Gospel calls for a response like Mary's at that very first Christmas. That song is our song too. It's recorded in scripture so we are reminded of God's goodness and gracious favour that he has shown to us in the Christ child who brings us saving help. Mary's song inspired by the same Holy Spirit who brought the conception of Jesus about calls us also to praise God for the goodness of his grace and favour and saving help to us too.

Often we call God to rouse himself don't we, joining in with the Psalmist: "O LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, rouse yourself to punish all the nations; show no mercy to wicked traitors (Psalm 59:5). But it's not God who has to wake up. He is the God of Israel who neither slumbers nor sleeps, Psalm 121 proclaims. It's us that have to be roused. The philosopher and social activist Edmund Burke once said that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. Could it be that God lets these tragedies happen to shake the so-called mighty west from its complacency towards God's Kingdom coming and his will being done on earth to turn to him and live for him alone—perhaps a complacency that has seeped into the church also?

Could it be then that the tragedies that trouble us are a wake up call to God's own people too? When we lament why someone won't do something, could it be God prompting us to not just live by a verbal confession, but as Mary did, joyfully say: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" so that rather than opting in and out of service and witness, we become consumed with making a difference wherever we can by showing the love of the Christ child to those around us, so it is obvious to the world it is He who we love and adore. Will we pray as though the Lord is indeed with us in our praying, just as we confess each Sunday in the greeting before the prayer of the day: 'The Lord be with you/and also with you'? Will we pray as though we really do believe that with God, nothing is impossible?

So as we near the end of Advent and prepare to celebrate anew the glorious birth of Jesus, let's not forget Mary's response. Because what Christmas really means to us will be seen not just how we celebrate on December the 25<sup>th</sup>, but how we are inspired to prepare to live as though it is Christmas day on December the 26<sup>th</sup>...and 27<sup>th</sup>...and 28<sup>th</sup>...and in January...and February...and every day of the year, long after we've recycled all the packaging, after we've taken the tree and the lights and decorations down and put them in the plastic container which becomes hidden deep down the back of the shed. Even after we've packed away our ceramic or wooden mangers and nativity scenes, with the baby Jesus wrapped in newspaper out of sight, may the living Christ child be fully on display in our lives and give us a different kind of heartburn than that which we get from overindulging, but a burning heart, like Mary's that confesses: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

The world needs us to rouse from our slumber. As we do, the Lord is with you, for like Mary you are highly favoured by God. Not because of anything you have done or any quality you possess, but simply because through His written and incarnate Word, God has led you to trust His promise and so you are righteous through faith. And so the Lord is with you. So pray and live as God's favoured people, knowing that what the angel says is true: nothing is impossible for God. As we count down to Christmas let those who visit our homes not just see a manger scene under the tree, but by the grace of God may they see the Christ child in our hearts too. Pray he will bring to fruit many possibilities through you to touch others with the love and compassion of Jesus, as you live as though every day were Christmas day.

And it is. For the Lord is with you, his favoured people. Amen.