

Luke 1:26-38. Advent 4. 8am. 2020

There's been a lot of debate recently between politicians and scientists about how we might safely celebrate Christmas - there's a stark contrast between what is allowed and what is considered safe.

At one end of the spectrum, you're perfectly at liberty to meet indoors with up to 3 different households for up to 5 days and then at the other end we're advised to stay home, keep to your bubble and not overwhelm the NHS.

The onus has been put back on us, whether we say yes or no to family gatherings. Personally, I've found it quite difficult to ask family members not to visit over the festive period, others will come to a different arrangement. We each have to decide. But what a mess, who do we listen to, where's the clear messaging, who do you trust - the politicians or the scientists? and where is God in this mess?

In our gospel reading this morning the angel Gabriel says to Mary, "Greetings, favoured one!" Now that's quite reassuring that Mary should be highly favoured by God. What an incredible calling on her life to be the bearer of the Saviour of the World, to be chosen by God in that way.

And yet, Mary's decision to say YES to God will have drastic consequences for her life. The angel called her "highly favoured." Perhaps Mary reflected on that encounter when she stood at the foot of the cross and reflected on the pain she had felt in her life, how the sword had pierced her soul and thought to herself, "Is this what it means to be favoured by God"?

Her life, like ours, was a mixture of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, clarity and confusion. And just like us, Mary had to learn to navigate the rough waters of life in such a way as to find meaning and purpose as a child of God. From the moment Mary uttered: "Let it be with me according to your word." her world was turned upside down; it went from well-ordered to messy.

Firstly, Mary's engagement was now in a mess. We know the story, becoming pregnant during her betrothal she is faced with divorce at the very least. Mary had become a disgrace to the family and an embarrassment to Joseph - her relationships are at a low ebb.

Then, Mary's finances were a mess. We know that when she and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem there was no room at the inn. Well, call me cynical, but I'm pretty sure a room could have been found if they'd had the money to pay for one and a little more besides; but Joseph was a simple carpenter, not much money in that, they would always be living on a shoestring.

Thirdly, Mary's community was in a mess. She was a Jew, growing up under Roman occupation - where Herod ruled with a rod of iron. This was a dangerous place in which to try and raise a child.

But of course, something else was happening in this story about Mary - a miracle was emerging out of the mess. The miracle of the Saviour of the World was growing within her and whilst she considered the external circumstances and could only see problems, God was looking beyond the problems and preparing for the birth of this extraordinary child. For Mary, the coming miracle was obscured by what was going on around her - but that did not make the miracle any less real.

I believe in miracles. I believe they emerge slowly, secretly, they don't come fully-grown - they need time to be nurtured and safeguarded in the womb of our being. The reality of this year stands in stark contrast to the hopes and dreams we held last Christmas. Perhaps the story of Mary and the annunciation comes as a timely reminder of the things that truly matter in our lives.

Our relationships with those around us - may we always be slow to judge and quick to forgive.

Our support of those living in poverty - on a shoestring. This year, more than ever families are struggling financially and emotionally and local churches have been there to offer that support.

And finally, when we're on the other side of this pandemic pray that our communities may be rebuilt, not to benefit the few - the already powerful, but for the benefit of the many; based on fairness, well-being and compassion.

If we can do that, we will perhaps be able to look back and make some sense of the current mess and hopefully to see it for what it is, the birthplace of a Christmas miracle.

20th December 2020