

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Advent

We are living in disturbing times especially for front line workers be they medics, care workers, supermarket workers, HGV drivers and many others who daily risk their own health and safety for the rest of us. These are also disturbing times for all those in the retail trade, especially those working in hospitality. These are also disturbing times for those who have to make huge political decisions, balancing the possibility of catching the virus with mental health issues, not to mention the economy. There are disturbing times to come with the relaxation of the restrictions, balancing Christmas expectations with the reality of the virus still with us.

Disturbance is in today's gospel, when a young woman, Mary, engaged but not yet married to Joseph, is greatly disturbed when she receives a message from God through the angel Gabriel. The reason for her disturbance is the Angel's greeting – Rejoice so highly favoured the Lord is with you – hardly something she would expect to hear. Gabriel, responds by telling her not to be afraid, but what follows was enough to terrify her, she is to conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus. What? Mary's fear turns to astonishment and not unnaturally the question How? Doesn't it take two for this to happen, and it hadn't happened with Joseph? She could not possibly have expected Gabriel's reply, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.' Is Mary really any the wiser or is she at least in part reassured when she is told about Elizabeth's pregnancy, itself also out of the ordinary because of her age? Whatever, her final response is the one we remember and for which we are eternally grateful. 'I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me.'

We know this story so well, but we hear it in these disturbing times when we are being told to do or not to do things which in 'normal' circumstances we would decide for ourselves. There will be many disappointments in the days leading up to Christmas and at Christmas itself. If we demythologise the Christmas story and really acknowledge what is there it might help us to appreciate that our disappointments will be small compared to the reality of many people's lives today. Young women who are trafficked or become pregnant not through love but force. People driven from their homelands because of violence, fear, a lack of freedom. Migrants and refugees holed up in camps with inadequate facilities, waiting for clearance to chance their luck somewhere else, uncertain of the welcome they will receive. The homeless, present on the streets of even the richest countries of the world, making use of a park bench or a shop doorway.

We might be tempted to forget this when we look into a crib in church or in our homes, but we do well to remember that the birth of Jesus took place during disturbing times, and remains THE sign that God is with us, Emmanuel, in every circumstance of our lives, especially with those who are suffering. This is Good News that we are called to share, not just in these last days of Advent, nor as we celebrate Christmas later this week, but throughout the whole year, indeed the whole of our lives. Will we?

Bidding Prayers for the 4th Sunday of Advent

Celebrant:

O come , O Key of David, come and open wide our heavenly home, make safe the way that leads on high and close the path to misery.

Reader:

For the Church – that in these days before Christmas the Church will herald the Good News of the coming birth of Jesus as a sign of God’s confidence in the human race.

Lord in your mercy

For our world – that all the places where violence reigns may be healed by the gift of Christ’s peace.

Lord in your mercy

For all those who are welcoming relatives with dementia into their homes – that they will be supported by family and friends as they adjust to a different way of life.

Lord in your mercy

For all modern day prophets – that they will challenge society to reads the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.

Lord in your mercy

For those who have died, all victims of violence, accident, natural disaster and the Covid 19 pandemic, and Monica Wild, Kevin Gibson, Elizabeth Mitchell, Fr Daniel Desmond MSC, Anne Buckley, Adelaide Lister, Mary Ward, Louise McMahon, George Newton, May Mills, Vera Ackerley, Christine Burns, Pat Sparkes, Ann Cassidy, Teresa Cox, Ellen Anderton and Trudi Gedzieliewski whose anniversaries occur this week – that they and all who have died may rest in peace and rise in glory.

Lord in your mercy

Either aloud or in silence we pray for our own special intentions...pause...then

Lord in your mercy

We ask the prayers of Mary who said Yes to the angel, as we pray, Hail Mary...

Celebrant:

God of all goodness you provide the key that unlocks the way to salvation, the gift of your Son. Through him you destroy the prison walls of death for all those who dwell in fear and darkness. Set free this day those who are burdened in whatever way. This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen