

4th Sunday of Advent - December 18, 2016

I worked with a lecturer a while back in university who became a really good friend but who avoided anything to do with Christmas like the plague! For Sian it was associated with all sorts of family tensions and issues over the years so she preferred to avoid it all together. And talking to Sue's regular carers over the years who can never believe I haven't been 'ready for Christmas' since the end of summer. One of them admitted she gets into a blind panic at this time of year and finds it hard to sleep. Even the legendary Delia Smith admits to spending her Advent in *panic* wanting everything to be perfect. She says: "No matter how hard I worked, so-and-so had such-and-such (and I didn't send cards to the people I received them from!...)".

Yet this time of year is such a great opportunity to remind people of God's incredible love for them - and we seem to spend all our *energies elsewhere*. So here's

a good question for our fourth week of Advent: what is it that we can learn from our readings today about how to bless God's heart? We read about two characters who make two very different responses to God - and they help show the kinds of response *God loves* to get from his children (on the one hand) and those I don't think he's particularly enamoured of (on the other). I'm sure you've heard the famous Christmas story of a family who had twin boys whose only resemblance to each other was their looks. If one felt it was too hot, the other thought it was way too cold. If one said the TV was too loud, the other claimed the volume needed to be cranked up. They were opposite in every way, one was an eternal optimist, the other a doom & gloom pessimist.

Just to see what would happen one Christmas the twins' father loaded the gloomy one's room with every imaginable toy and game - and the cheerful one's room

with horse manure. That night the father passed by the one son's room and found him sitting amid his new gifts crying bitterly. "Why are you crying?" the father asked. "Because my friends will be jealous, I'll have to read all these instructions before I can do anything with this stuff, I'll constantly need batteries, and my toys will eventually get broken,"

Passing the optimist twin's room, the father found him dancing for joy in the pile of manure. "What are you so happy about?" he asked. To which his optimistic twin replied, "There's got to be a pony in here somewhere!"

Now then our two characters who I'm sure you've worked out are Ahaz and Joseph. And I'm sure the question occurred to you while the passage from Isaiah was being read to us... So why *is it* that King Ahaz *won't* ask God for a sign - particularly after being permitted to do so, by the Lord himself? The reason he gives

sounds like a good, solid, humble, religious response, but the tone and context of the story makes it abundantly clear that it really isn't. Ahaz's protests sounds awfully virtuous, don't they: "I won't put the Lord to the test". (You can imagine the proud tone, can't you?). And doesn't it remind us a bit of the Gospels where Jesus is often being asked for a sign - and refuses to give one. So it's perfectly legit' to ask why is Ahaz *not* right when he refuses to request such a thing. Well there's a simple answer - and that is that in his case he's wrong *because God himself has told Ahaz to ask* - and that his refusal to do so is a deliberate determination to turn his back on what God is offering him. Now we need just a little bit of background to see what's going on - stay with me.

King Ahaz's kingdom - Judah - was in the middle of a deep political crisis. It was being attacked from two sides, with two neighbouring kingdoms trying to

force Judah into an alliance with Assyria - a burgeoning superpower at the time And *God had* already spoken to Ahaz before all this: that he didn't have anything to fear, he'd be okay if he carried on trusting *God* - *but Ahaz doesn't believe him*. So when we come to today's reading we begin to see the real reason why he's rejecting *God* - he simply doesn't trust him - and he's *already decided* to submit to the Assyrian King. In other words he's decided to trust his own political instincts, rather than trusting *God* for his protection. So now we can understand why he has this attitude: he doesn't want to risk letting *God* mess up his decision with signs of his presence & power. (Don't mess with things *God* we're fine as we are, thank you!) What Ahaz doesn't know is that his failure to keep his nerve is indeed a huge sign that reverberates down the centuries (now, with me so far?)

The gospel writer Matthew picks up on this 'sign' - and knows exactly how to interpret the young woman whose child is called 'God with us' (so much for King Ahaz!).

Joseph is the other character in this morning's story. His encounter with the angel is told in very straightforward, pragmatic language. There are no special stage effects or pyrotechnics (like when the Welsh rugby team enters the Principality Stadium these days) - there's just Joseph asleep and dreaming. But what a different response we get from him compared to Ahaz. (Paul Holland did it best a while ago during the Christmas Experience with his youthful bride to be... - "I will marry her - yes!"). Joseph *follows* what he's told to do in his dream: he marries Mary, and unassumingly "steps into the story of the world's salvation". Though *he* doesn't know it, Ahaz steps *out* of the light, into the background, and because of his

disobedience, his failure to trust, allows events to take place without him.

It's hard to do justice to Joseph. We get so little information and few insights into his character, and the nativity story could so clearly have been told without him. But thankfully Matthew is prepared to give him his due. Unlike Ahaz, Joseph **trusts** God, simply and immediately - although it involves him in heartache and shame as a consequence, The sign Ahaz rejects becomes a hopeful one for us: that human beings are capable of responding to each other and to God. In Matthew's thinking, Joseph's role as the one who listens to God and protects his family is *absolutely vital*. Joseph's function is to be there for others, to forget himself (and his needs, desires and political instincts - like to run away from all the controversy and gossip that must have been swilling around that village like smelly manure) and to make room - to make a way - for

God's action to take place. It's his very self-abnegation - renouncing the temptation not to get involved - denying himself he makes way for the presence of God to fully come.

Oh boy what a lesson for us! You know - we're probably all getting a little tired and tetchy (someone forgetting to replace the milk, or Communion wine, or candles! - at the end of a difficult year, or maybe a long school term (!), Perhaps we're not feeling particularly brilliant physically and a bit 'strung-out' emotionally - and we can so easily miss the joy of this Advent Season because we've naturally learned to rely on our own resources and instincts (and adrenalin!) to just get us through. Now I don't know about you, but mine have petered out - years ago if I'm being honest! And it's not a bad thing to have happened either. "Busy

time of year for you..." (people say) Yes - I always say - *good busy!*

Now then (final q.): where does the Apostle Paul fit into all this? - apart, that is, from his constant advice to the congregations of the new Christian churches to be patient and kind and forgiving to each other (!). Paul makes no mention of Joseph (or Mary for that matter) in Romans or anywhere else - but the mission he accepts is very similar to Joseph's. Paul is to protect the Word of God and make room for it in the world. Paul is called to bear witness to that sign that Ahaz rejected - and Joseph accepted - which is? 'Emmanuel - 'God with us'.

I love how Jane Williams reflects on this:
"Thanks...to Joseph's willingness to be nothing more nor less than God asks him to be, Paul, the Romans and we [that's 'us'] can see the fulfilment of prophecy. God is infinitely patient in doing what he promised, and he

never forgets" - why? - because as I said last week, he's a covenant-keeping God. The promise made to David, rejected by Ahaz, misunderstood and misinterpreted by many others, comes to completion in Jesus. And as the promise waits, it grows and grows, to include more and more of us in its embrace - the table gets bigger.

When we started on this Advent journey we knew it'd be challenging didn't we? It always is, because it says hold off - wait a bit - be patient. We've had the challenge of being ready; of repenting and turning towards God; of being alert and waiting in anticipation, of God's radical, tectonic-plate shifting message in Christ, not a dumbed-down schmaltzy, churchy version - and now on this fourth Sunday it's the challenge of asking where we stand in relation to God's promise.

Because (once again) we have a choice: to stand with Ahaz, or to stand with Joseph. To refuse God's sign, the sign of the coming child - step out of the

story, rely on our own resources and instincts, *appear* devout and religious, but actually not really trust God at all. That's where a lot of so-called 'nominal' Christianity is - and it's not going to harm or provoke anyone or anything.

Or we can accept the call to protect the child and to help the world see him as the sign that God is indeed *with* us. If we choose to stand with Joseph, difficult for our own egos and self-interest though this can be, because we have to just get on with it without any plaudits, isn't there joy knowing that God's forgiving and restoring action in Christ is going to be made available to a waiting and needy world?! One of the earliest Latin apologists for Christianity, Minucius Felix, put it like this way back in the third century in Rome, "*Beauty of life causes strangers to join our ranks. We do not talk about great things; we live them*". That's why we put so much emphasis on being disciples, and as

being part of a lifelong community with a clear purpose - to show what God is like - to allow people to discover his love in Jesus Christ.

Christians, like their Master, Jesus, can be totally secure in their relationship with the Father - even if everything else is going horribly pear-shaped - as it often does! In a world marred by sin and suffering, hardship & loss are inevitabilities - for everybody - and (probably) particularly for those who seek to live for God. After all, we follow a crucified Messiah and cannot expect any bed of roses - and we were never promised one!! As Oswald Chambers says, if God was prepared to bruise his Son, why not us - why not you and me?

So yes Christian discipleship has a cost to it. But(and here's the great news as Christmas is so nearly upon us) what we **are** promised is the endless, unremitting,

detailed, loving care of the Father over every aspect of our lives. (repeat!)

Now I think that's a tremendous cause for Advent celebration - don't you?! And let us pray, along with good old Delia, for the wisdom to ponder this great mystery we are about to celebrate and to be lovingly attentive to its meaning and purpose. **Amen**