

## Advent 4 - 'rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold'

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May my words be faithful to the written word, and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the Lord. Amen.

Imagine if you will a window expressing a ferment of creation... the shifting colours and shapes of the glass becoming an image of the varied aspects of the changing world of time through which the light of eternity shines. (pause)

Today is the 4th Sunday of Advent, when the Church invites her members to reflect on the icon, or image, of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the topmost branch of the Jesse tree, the one acclaimed in our scripture as 'blessed among women'. Where the world thinks the story is almost over, we know that it is only just beginning. Where misers seek value in gold and the presents of the coming days, we know the true value to delight is in the God who comes through Mary, the 'threshold' (Gregory Palamas), to inhabit our very flesh. And I hope today to offer a defence of the incarnation and Mary's role.

John the Baptist and Mary, enwombed in today's gospel, are the two towering figures of Advent. The two who draw us most closely to the mystery of Advent, and to the action of God in the Incarnation. What a task to say something about the patron of our Church, in this year of 775 years of this building, as we stand on the threshold of the incarnation of the co-eternal Son, the Word of life.

At the heart of the Christian faith lies the belief that God enters the material world. The fullness of the deity is revealed not only in the mind and speech of Jesus, but in the *body* of Jesus, that which he

took from Mary - that in which Christ is most at one with us. Yes, Jesus knew the most basic of human experiences, needs and satisfactions, fulfilment and anxieties - because of the soil in which the divine is revealed and grows. For God has entered into the very processes of birth and embodied life.

The faith which we express as we think of Incarnation - God with us (Immanuel) - is that in spite of all the empirical disorder and decay, the human is capable of the divine. It is precisely because of this that Mary is seen in much Christian tradition as the joy of joys, the joy of all creation. For in Mary there is a meeting of opposites, of God and humankind, of flesh and spirit, of time and eternity; as from the little clan of Bethlehem, comes forth one to rule from the ancient of days (Micah 5).

For some, the idea of Mary as special is challenging. To such, I point out that without Mary, there is no place for Christ to take flesh. Her role is, I would suggest, undeniable. At the same time, we do need to hold a healthy scepticism. As TS Eliot wrote comparing himself with Marxists, 'They seem so certain of what they believe. My own beliefs are held with a scepticism which I never even hope to be quite rid of.'

So we must hold to an openness to God's means of communication. As the eminent Anglican theologian Richard Hooker expressed it, 'God as the ultimate reality must be approached by many paths; through the witness of nature and of the religious impulse, as well as through the special revelation which God has given us.' To each of these too we must all add our own method, 'only seeking to show how in the end they corroborate one another'

As we stand on Advent 4, poised for the explosion of the Incarnation, the birth of God in flesh (the special revelation), we are reminded that ours is a religion of flesh and blood, of Eucharist and Resurrection. And each time we reenact Eucharist - obeying Christ's very command to *do this in remembrance of me*, - we are reminded that 'the powers of the world to come invade the present and already move towards the victory' to come (Francis Paget). In 2 days time we see the 'today' which reminds us that in every Eucharist there is an intersection of the timeless with time (the 'hearts up' of the *Sursum Corda*). For as we reflect on the Incarnation, we know in our visceral selves that time enters eternity, and there is an alliance of love through which Christ draws us up to be where Christ forever is.

In Mary, the earth has brought forth a Saviour. Remember Genesis 3.19 - 'you are earth and to earth you shall return'? Well here is the fulfilment spoken of in Psalm 85, 'Truth shall spring out of the earth'. It is classic Christian teaching that in the person of the Virgin, humanity co-operates actively with the Spirit to seed the Word of God. There are those who question the Virgin birth. To such views, I'm tempted to point to creation and say that if we believe that God creates from nothing, then a Virgin birth must be a simple task in comparison. And we hold to this because without it, surely we are left without a God inhabiting flesh? There are those who say that God had a true body made in heaven sent down - the German term is fabulous '*senkrecht von oben*' 'straight down from above' - with no contribution from the human side. Yet (as Karl Barth saw in his later writings) we do not truly exalt God by seeking to depress humanity, made in God's image.

Without the real incarnation we are left without human substance joined to the divine, or to put it in a non-technical non-theological term, ‘we’re stuffed’! Christ as an embryo had to go ‘to the root, and repair our nature from the very foundation’. This is an idea set out by Lancelot Andrewes, who goes on to argue that in Christ’s time of gestation he was not idle, but ‘then and there he even ate out the core of corruption’.

Yes, our God enters into the unknown world of conception and development, the mainly pre-conscious period of mysterious life which lie around the centre of our consciousness. As a 20th century poet put it, we find swimming among ‘sea beasts and archetypal monsters...the Easter-fish’: Christ has been there through the Incarnation.

Our capacity for relationship with God is great: for, ‘God can reach us through any of the modes of our life, through our dream consciousness, through our waking intellect, though that is much more capable of resisting God, and through the vegetative life of our body, in which God may be most constantly present.’ (Written by the poet Les Murray in an essay entitled *Embodiment and Incarnation*).

Today we rejoice as a community under the patronage of Mary, the ‘teacher of the apostles’. For through Mary, our patron, we see: ‘infinite greatness...become so little. Eternity as a child, the rays of glory wrapped in rags, Heaven crowded into the corner of a stable, and God that is everywhere want room.’ (Jeremy Taylor)

As we gather around this altar let us glory that Christ still comes to make a home among us through the feast of the Eucharist, seeking room in our minds and bodies. For here in the Eucharist we are

invited to know ourselves highly favoured; here the Holy Spirit overshadows us; here we are all made blessed Mary's and become mothers, sisters and brothers of the Lord; here grace is in its fullest plenty, and God is birthed once more. And here in response begins our song of Testimony in response to God's gracious invitation, as we give birth to the Word in our lives out in the world.

This Advent 4, as we think of Mary the joy of all creation, may we be resourced in joy once more as we enter this celebration of God being enfleshed as one of us. May we reawaken and discover afresh the God who comes to us in our dream consciousness, and in the vegetative life of our very being. And may we ensure there is room in our houses for Christ to come and dwell this Christmas time.

Think back for a moment to that window I invited you to imagine, expressing a ferment of creation, through which the light of eternity shines... We become a part of the window of light, as the Spirit of God continues to be birthed in and through the Christian community - and all creation. Through Mary, we become a part of the church building, as once again 'a ferment of birth, a white hot ferment/Of fragile colours' spring up around us. Friends, you and I are part of the Cauldron of Birth which Celtic mythology speaks of, for as S Paul reminds us we all drink of the one Spirit (I Cor 12.13).

Today as we move out into the world we do so mindful that 'Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold...you never enjoy the world.' (Traherne). May you enjoy this Christmas, knowing great joy; and above all may you, like Mary, delight in God as misers do in gold. Amen.