

SERMON FOR ADVENT 4 at 8am | 24.12.2017

One of the visitors to St James' recently was intrigued by our statues. First she looked at St James because she had walked the Camino and wanted to photograph this statue for her collection. Then she looked at the statue of Our Lady in the corner and asked: what is it made of?

The answer of course is plaster, which makes her a plaster saint. Which could not be further from the truth!

As we come to the end of Advent and are thrust, this evening, into the hurley-burley of Christmas Eve, we have one last brief chance to understand how ill prepared the world was for the birth of Jesus. We know we are not ready for Christmas - but that is nothing new: an occupied land at the time of a forced and highly inconvenient census; a couple engaged but not married, expecting a baby of which Joseph was not the father. That's unprepared!

My parents lived in Birkenhead just after the war and they lived opposite the Murphy's. The way my mother told the story, you got the impression that probably not even Mr and Mrs Murphy knew how many children they had because the rule of the house was that if you sat down at their kitchen table at tea-time, you got fed. No questions asked. Whatever food Mrs Murphy had managed to cobble together was shared by however many were there.

Was she ready? Yes and no. In one sense how could she be ready because she didn't know what was going to come her way. Yet in another sense her whole attitude to life was an acceptance of what might happen.

Was Mary ready for an early pregnancy, for discussions with angels or with Simeon at the Temple? Was she ready for the ministry of Jesus including his extraordinary pulling power among the crowds and the personal rebuffs that seemed to come her way when she asked to see him? Ultimately was she ready for his journey to Jerusalem and to Calvary? How could she be?

Except by disposition: what stands out in Jesus' mother's whole demeanor was her ability to take whatever was meted out to her.

I suspect none of us finds this at all easy: I certainly don't. I want to be able to control my own destiny. The pain of Nazanin Zhagari-Ratcliffe's situation is not just the inside of an Iranian jail and separation from her child and her husband; the searing anxiety comes from not knowing if and when she will face more charges; yet more uncertainty. Richard her husband rightly talks about her mental anguish being worse than her physical stress.

And Nazanin's experience is mirrored the world over by the Rohingya exodus in Myanmar, the flooding in Guatemala, the drought in South Africa and, closer to home, all those relying on Food Banks to get to the end of the year. People in each of these situations really do not know where the next meal will come from.

So what is the message set within today's 1st reading? Via Nathan the prophet God speaks directly to David about the way he has cared for Israel when they were nomads. *Never once did I complain*, he says, *because I didn't have a permanent home, a permanent shrine*. It is as if the model of the wandering Aramean is in their life-blood. *But now, God says, it is time for you to settle down. I want to set up a ruling house, a dynasty, which will be a sign of my favour to my people for ever* – known to us, of course, as the House of David, the tribe of which Jesus was a member.

And this is the tension we can all recognize: while God finally got his Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus moved from house to house: *the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*. In Mary's life there were journeys too - from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Bethlehem to Egypt and back again, journeys in pursuit of Jesus throughout Galilee and Judea - and of course the final journey of Jesus to Calvary.

As we move into the Christmas season, as we enjoy the warmth of our homes and the company of friends, don't let's get too comfortable! Just remember those around the world who don't know what will happen to them next - who will be forced, like Mary, to accept whatever comes.

And to our French visitor we can say: *she was no plaster saint for her final response was always: Be it unto me according to your word?*