

SERMON FOR ADVENT 4 | 23.12.2018

Very many years ago, I asked the famous former bishop of Durham David Jenkins, to preach in my little Church in Bradford. It was he who famously wrote that the Resurrection was nothing to do with whether or not anyone had found Jesus' bones and you may remember that it was very shortly after his consecration as a bishop that fire broke out, demolishing the roof of one wing of York Minster – a way, some said, of God showing his disapproval!

Having him at St Martin's was quite a big deal for us and it was part of the 40th anniversary of the Church which had been built in 1955. We were hoping for great things that day! So when, as we stood in the vestry beforehand, he said that he had brought just 'a simple parish sermon' I guess I felt a bit let down!

But it was a good sermon none the less and as we turn to the fourth theme of Advent – to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, I hope that we can recapture something of David Jenkins' approach and his call for simplicity as we look again briefly at the life of Jesus' mother.

Because if we try to remember all the episodes, from each of the Gospels where Mary is described, they paint quite a mixed picture.

Of course the best known scene at this time of the year is of Mary, sitting at home in Nazareth when the Angel Gabriel appears to her in a vision and tells her that despite being a virgin she is going to have a baby. And we have that wonderful poem in St Luke when she utters those famous words: *be it unto me according to your word.*

But from that highlight, today's Gospel tells us that as soon as Mary knows she is pregnant she rushes off to her sister Elizabeth - only to find that she too is expecting a baby despite being very much older than Mary. So already Mary's joy is a shared one.

Then the news of the census and the realization that because Joseph is of the clan of David based in Jerusalem, pregnant or not, she and he have to make a huge journey in order not to miss the count. Then there is no hotel and they are forced to squat in the stables.

And no sooner has the birth of Jesus taken place than there is the dire threat to her child as Herod, fed information by the Magi, goes on the war path, scared that a new child will challenge his position as king.

Only a dream saves their lives as they escape in the nick of time from Bethlehem, taking another huge journey to safety in Egypt. Only when Herod is finally dead are they able to return - not to Jerusalem but to the northern city of Nazareth where Jesus grew up.

And Mary pondered all these things in her heart...

And then another journey: Mary back on a donkey with all her relatives and friends as they visit the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus is about 12. And does that work out well? Not really because in the middle of the celebrations they lose him in the crowds and when they finally find him, he is sitting among the professors in the Temple university – and he is teaching them, not the other way round! Worse, Mary and Joseph, uncomfortable to be there at all with their country accents and unpolished manners, are then told off by their son – in front of the rabbis - for being upset: *shouldn't they have known that he would be about his Father's business?*

It is no easier when he is starting his ministry and she and his closest friends have been invited to a big wedding. Wouldn't it be her luck that the wine runs out and the steward in charge asks her to get her son to do something special to help them out?

And isn't Jesus short with her yet again? *It isn't the right time*, he tells her ... but does the water into wine miracle anyway.

And what about the time when she and Jesus' brothers and sisters follow Jesus into a town where he is preaching, only to find the house packed to the rafters and they can't get to see him. What response does she get from Jesus when she sends him a message? *Don't ask for special treatment: all these are my mothers and brothers and sisters too.*

And finally the journey to Jerusalem, to the tragedy of the trial and the Cross where Mary watches and waits with such pain.

And always the words of Simeon, spoken in the Temple at the time of Jesus' birth: that the events of Jesus' life would pierce her heart. Would they be some kind of consolation? I don't think so.

How often Mary must have sat and wondered how she could have got things so wrong. Her life seemed to be one long chase after another, trying to support Jesus and keep him safe, yet seeming, so often, to fail.

Out in the towns and villages, everyone seemed to be more important than her. He didn't seem to have time to worry about her feelings... Had she let him down; could she have done more?

And Mary pondered all these things in her heart...

As we prepare to welcome Jesus once more this Christmas, we are invited to do some pondering ourselves. Looking back over the last few months – even this last year – can we honestly say we have allowed Jesus a special place in what we have been doing?

Can we say we have asked for his help, thanked him for his goodness and allowed him to show us the way forward? Have we been too full of our own plans to take him into account? Have we put time aside to sit and talk things through with him?

Have we resented the things that people have done to us? Have we shared our good fortune with others and allowed people we know and love to flourish at our expense?

Mary's life was every bit the roller-coaster experience that many of us are familiar with. She too felt alone, taken for granted, misunderstood. And yet she stuck to her first principle, spoken to the angel Gabriel when she was still little more than a child in Nazareth. *Be it unto me according to your word.*

Or as the song has it:

***Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord;
unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.***

What we are invited to do is really quite simple: to review our lives in God's presence and to say sorry for those things where selfishness and a lack of love have taken us. It's really very simple – but, of course it is hard too.

Which is why we have these large (penitential) stones to hold in our hands.

Only God can turn our hearts of stone into living vessels of love, justice and peace... if we will let him.

