

SERMON FOR ADVENT 4 2019 | 22.12.19

Isaiah 7: 10-16; Romans 1: 1-7; St Matthew 1: 18-end

Opening cards is one of the great pleasures of Christmas. I love it all: the choice of the card, the message inside – and best of all when people take the trouble to share something of what has happened to them over the year. Many of our friends and family live too far away to visit and these annual exchanges keep the links alive.

Trevor and Jenny were two members of the Choir at St Martin's in Bradford when I was there. They were very faithful parts of that small community on Haworth Road. In the card this year was not just a greeting but also the sad news of Trevor's sudden death. The envelope included, kindly, the service sheet for his funeral in early November.

And there, right in the middle of the inner page was the little hymn of John Bell's that I had adapted over 20 years ago and which was sung at every funeral of Church members in Bradford, '*Now that evening falls*'. And it brought a genuine tear to my eye. That this little piece should have been treasured by this family and survived their move to a Church I didn't know really moved me.

As we begin yet another Christmas – with all the familiar words and familiar music – I wait, with you, for the new message that will come out of our celebrations because that is how religion works. It is the way our relationship with God within the Church is constantly reshaping and reforming us, enlivening our imaginations to see beyond the here and now. In the middle of that ordinary service sheet a treasured song: *I am here, says God*. So what better than a few minutes of peace and quiet here, now, this morning, to reflect on the words of Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

Today's canticle between the readings, the Magnificat, are not of course, her words – any more than the song in the story of Samuel (1 Samuel 2) was penned by his mother Hannah. But they are both great anthems carrying the hope and desires of two extraordinary women. And they are both full of the most transparent confidence. They pour out like a flood in a barren land and they are both worth spending time on, not least because of the themes which are found in each.

To begin with, they are both so fresh and alive. It is as if their lives had been buttoned up and closed - when God, in this case because of the birth of their sons, suddenly throws open the shutters and lets the sunlight in. **As St John will tell us at Midnight Mass, *the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.***

But the Magnificat is not just a great song of happiness, a great outpouring of joie de vivre – though it is that; it is also the song of confidence that although there is much around us that can easily depress us, the irrepressible power of God is waiting, waiting to change things in ways we can never have expected.

Timothy Radcliffe, who has written spiritual books that have sustained me throughout my life, reminds us in his new book *Alive to God*, that the greatest difficulty of our age is not, actually unbelief, but superficiality. The problem with the Twitter age, to news cut down to a handful of headlines, is that even big events are overblown one minute and then relegated to the dustbin the next. Like Mary, Radcliffe believes that all of us need to be exposed – to sit with – the impossible, the infinite and the unbounded. *We should refuse, he writes, to be confined to what the world thinks interesting, possible and thinkable.* In that he mirrors Mary's words: *He has cast down the mighty from their thrones – and has lifted up the lowly...*

And he goes on to remind us that even in the darkest days of the Church God has raised up holy men and women who have taken up God's challenge to radically alter their situations. Often uncomfortable companions in the journey of faith these people share two crucial characteristics: they have the imagination to work in new ways – and they exude a confidence in things they cannot see. Mary says in the Magnificat: *God has come to the help of his servants and he has remembered his promise of mercy – the promise he made to our forebears.* Experience tells us he always has, and he always will.

The test for us, this Christmas, is to listen for the new words among the familiar, the eternal among the Twittering. One has come to me already: that little song of unity and trust, John Bell's '*Now that evening falls*'. It had survived so many dislocations over 20 years and more and yet, yesterday, it returned fresh and new, reminding me again of the enduring presence of a loving God.