**SERMON FOR ADVENT 4 | 20.12.20**

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16; Romans 16: 25-27’; St Luke 1: 26-38

***It will be so much more boring,* said a leading American TV anchorman recently, w*hen President Trump finally leaves the White House. How will we fill up all those hours without his stream of Twitter messages?!* To which one of his guests replied, *Ah, but there may be some space for truth!***

**Big people, male and female, have always stalked the corridors of power – and they always will. We could have fun asking which personalities have filled your air-time this year? And not just so- called personalities but also the people who have held your attention over the last year? Who are the people who have interested you, made you think, touched you with special kindness – or demanded a lot from you? Who are the ‘little people’ without whom you could not have got through the year? Who has most taken you by surprise in a way that has made your life happier? Who has changed your mind?**

**In a very circuitous web-trawl – the kind of thing that can be so interesting when you have a few minutes to spare - I came across an article by the political commentator Peter Hitchens. Now I don’t agree with much of what he says but his writing is always fun. And he was looking back, you may well remember, to the big demonstration that closed St Paul’s Cathedral back in 2011. Let me give you just a taste of his description of the people who were camping outside the west door:**

***Every crank, dingbat and fanatic in Southern England has found his or her way to the camp by the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral. Given time, every faddist in Europe will arrive. There are already plenty of North American accents.***

***Whatever your cause, it has a pavilion here, especially if it is a lost cause. The poor Kurds are represented. There’s a Buddhist shrine next to an arrow marking the direction of Mecca. Che Guevara, that old mass murderer, has his image on display. There’s propaganda against the ‘persecution of sex-workers’. The Socialist Workers Party have a stall that looks a little too neat and tidy for the occasion. In short, it is a chaotic, self-righteous festival of drivel…***

**Giles Fraser, who often does Thought for the Day on Radio 4, and who was both a former tutor in philosophy at Wadham College Oxford and Canon Chancellor of St Pauls’ at the time, was later fired for trying to make friends with the Occupy protestors camped outside the Cathedral doorstep. Part of his reflections included this tweet: *And BTW I don’t think the Red Flag is anywhere near as revolutionary as the Magnificat.***

**The Magnificat, the words of today’s Gospel, said to have been spoken by Mary when she heard she was to be mother of the new born Jesus. While no one pretends they were her actual words, St Luke follows the classic tradition of summarising a whole life-time of experience in a stunning poem that has become probably the greatest hymn of the Christian Church for 2000 years, recited or sung as part of every service of Evensong.**

**So what makes the Magnificat so revolutionary? *He hath shewed strength with his arm. He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.***

**Fraser is right; it is a political manifesto – the thinking of a teenage girl with no experience of life who was about to have a baby out of wedlock in a society where such things were barely tolerated. She looked beyond herself, beyond the present time and the current world order - to a time when it was the weak and the poor who would set the agenda.**

**Hitchen’s response to Giles Fraser was wholly predictable and fitted in with his support for capital punishment and his opposition to same sex marriage: *couldn’t someone point out that this was a promise of eternal justice, not a programme for government.***

**But is it, is it really?**

**Is it unreasonable to seek to kick the pedestal from under the feet of ‘the proud’ and ‘the mighty’, those who think they have a right to govern and an entitlement to be heard across the many mass media platforms that exist today? Whatever we might think of the causes represented outside St Paul’s and the style of their protest, can’t we at least feel the frustration of the many who have a vision for a more just and equal society - but who find themselves squeezed out of the airwaves and the debating chambers by big and articulate people who simply have no time for those trying to explore alternative ways of running things?**

**Mary stands in her house. It is not of any consequence, anymore than she is a person of consequence. And yet on her shoulders lies the real future: *You will give birth to a Son and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.***

**All the time we are, as Christians, involved in the Tale of Two Cities, the one we see with our eyes – involving our current politics and economics, apparently as solid as a rock: the one on which we are so dependent.**

**But there is also the other city, the city of Mary, of Mary and of countless generations of faithful Christian men and women, who see beyond the power driven, cynical and materialistic world – those able to draw down from heaven the strength to work for a society based on justice, peace, compassion – and truth.**

**Perhaps the saddest part of Peter Hitchen’s article is his last paragraph: *Contrast,* he writes, *the great classical majesty of St Paul’s Cathedral - one of man’s most successful attempts to combine reason, science and hope - with the chaotic, self-righteous festival of drivel outside. Yet there’s no doubt which of the two is closer to the mood of the modern world, more’s the pity.***

**I am afraid that this looks like someone who has given up: as if there is no alternative to the mighty retaining their thrones and the poor lying at their gate. But I believe he is wrong. It may take us a while and the dead ends may be many: but the human spirit seeking change, freedom and fairness for all, is as powerful as ever. Why: because it flows directly from God’s ability to bring life out of death. As the story tells us, even Elizabeth’s old age was no barrier to her becoming a mother. *For with God nothing is impossible to those whose whole outlook proclaims ‘the greatness of the Lord.’***