

**SUNDAY 20 DECEMBER 2020 – FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
COLLECT, READINGS AND REFLECTION**

COLLECT

God our redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:
grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Psalm 89.1-4 + 19-26

- 1 My song shall be always of the loving-kindness of the Lord: ♦
with my mouth will I proclaim your faithfulness throughout all generations.
- 2 I will declare that your love is established for ever; ♦
you have set your faithfulness as firm as the heavens.
- 3 For you said: 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one; ♦
I have sworn an oath to David my servant:
- 4 "Your seed will I establish for ever ♦
and build up your throne for all generations."
- 19 You spoke once in a vision and said to your faithful people: ♦
'I have set a youth above the mighty; I have raised a young man over the people.
- 20 'I have found David my servant; ♦
with my holy oil have I anointed him.
- 21 'My hand shall hold him fast ♦
and my arm shall strengthen him.
- 22 'No enemy shall deceive him, ♦
nor any wicked person afflict him.
- 23 'I will strike down his foes before his face ♦
and beat down those that hate him.

24 'My truth also and my steadfast love shall be with him, 
and in my name shall his head be exalted.

25 'I will set his dominion upon the sea 
and his right hand upon the rivers.

26 'He shall call to me, "You are my Father, 
my God, and the rock of my salvation."

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Romans 16.25-27

25 Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Luke 1.26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection – from Mary-Lou

In our worship this Sunday - the closest to Christmas - we turn our gaze on Mary. Some of you may have heard me say this before, but I fell out with Mary as a little girl. It was all to do with nativity plays. All I wanted was to have blonde hair, sparkly tinsel and a white dress – I wanted to be an angel! But no, I was Mary. In blue. Yes, I did get to hold the Baby Jesus, but that didn't hold a candle at the time to the chance to have a tinsel crown! Seriously, it took me some time to get to know - even to want to get to know - Mary, the Blessed Virgin. The Church seemed to hold her up as someone quite beyond an ordinary girl or woman like me and the

other women I knew. But woven into St Luke's beautiful telling of the events leading to the birth of Christ, are some clues that actually tell us a good deal about Mary, and about our God.

For God's ways are not our ways, nor are his thoughts our thoughts, as Isaiah the prophet teaches! We see this in action in the people God calls to serve him in particular ways. Gideon, the most unlikely warrior. Or David, the shepherd boy and youngest in his family, who became Israel's greatest King. Or Saul, who persecuted Christians until he met the Risen Jesus. God chooses the most unlikely of us to serve him – people who if they'd applied for their roles wouldn't even have got an interview in human terms!

We know that Mary was a young girl, that she lived in an insignificant town in a very insignificant part of the Roman Empire, and that she was betrothed to a carpenter. There was nothing about her life thus far that could possibly have prepared her for a greeting from an angel (and not just any old angel, Gabriel himself!) Nor could it have prepared her for what Gabriel told her was about to happen. Mary had been specially chosen by God, but she seems to have nothing that might have been an obvious sign of God's favour ... not money, good health or a high social status. Some Christians today seem to believe that if God loves you, prosperity will follow as God's blessing on you. I'm not sure those who believe that have ever - really – read the Gospels.

What was the blessing for Mary? It was only too human, only too real. She was to bear an illegitimate child. This could have seen her stoned to death, but for the kindness of Joseph. In great peril Mary, with her family, was forced to become a refugee. And her child would later be tried and executed most cruelly as a criminal. Some blessing! Yet who in all the astonishing story of God's wonderful love, is more blessed, more to be praised, than the young woman who said yes, despite her fear and uncertainty? Mary's experience of what followed that 'Yes', is not one of increasing wealth, comfort or any of the other human measures of 'success' we so often look for. She offers no easy reassurances about the life of those who say yes to God. Once I understood this about Mary, and something of the reality of what it all meant for her, I came to love her.

In this beautiful and wondrous encounter with Gabriel, the whole of her life turns into a YES to all God asks of her. This is not something she can achieve in her own strength. The angel assures her that she will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and it is the power of the Most High at work in her that will accomplish everything! She will bear the Holy One. How brave, how strong, how open to the Word of God is Mary? The whole of God's purposes turn on how she will respond to God's call, heaven holds its breath. With her 'Yes' – 'Here am I ... let it be with me according to your word', she steps out in trust.

Like her, with her, we are invited, indeed encouraged to do the same - to step out in trust. It's not always easy, especially when life is at its most devastating, but the Holy Spirit is always with us. Like Mary, we are challenged to believe in what seems impossible – that God is at work, in our world, right now. We are challenged with the mother of Christ in these familiar words, to 'Go out into the darkness and put [our] hand, into the Hand of God.' (Minnie Louise Haskins, The Gate of the Year.)

May you find it possible to say a new 'Yes!' in your heart and your life, as you welcome the Christ Child this Christmas.