

Come hope of the world; comfort your people. Come hope of the world; comfort our hearts. Come heal all our sorrow, with love and compassion. Amen.

If you haven't had a chance to hear Rowan Williams reading his poem 'Advent Calendar' on day 16 of our cathedral Advent calendar on the website, then can I recommend it as one minute of your life well spent.

It is an absolute delight to hear him reading it, with its wonderful refrain – "he will come, he will come". I have to say that I can't resist reading the last verse to you, and I shall finish with that today.

For the first 16 days of Advent we've been looking forward to God's future: a healed creation. And given this year's context, the prayer that we pray every day - your kingdom come - has become particularly poignant I think.

From day 17 in Advent time goes backwards, to the birth of Christ. Christians have always lived with this creative tension, that you cannot resolve, between the past, the present, and the future. God's past, and future, converge on the now.

The energies of God's future are made available to us but God's reign is here and now, because of what happened 2000 years ago. The first Christmas, as we know, was a very small affair initially; in fact, it would have gone completely unnoticed: a mother, a father, and a baby: COVID-safe.

Today's gospel reading is the beginning of that story.

Luke's emphasis on Mary is striking for a number of reasons: she is not in the Davidic line: her husband-to-be is, but she has no significant ancestry. She holds no public position, or reputation, for piety; she has this angelic experience at home, not in the temple or in some sacred place. She lives in Nazareth, a northern town with a bad reputation. She is young, in a world that values age, and she is a woman, in a world run by men. She is soon to be surrounded, of course, by a family who are disturbed by her condition, and at the moment she has no official husband to validate her existence, as one commentator puts it. She is a powerless person in an unsafe world, where anyone making a messiah claim would have been immediately at risk.

There's a song doing the rounds at the moment and it's got a repeated refrain attached to it; it was written before COVID came on the scene, but the refrain is: 'I feel numb / in this kingdom / I feel numb / in this kingdom', and you can imagine Mary feeling just that: numbness and ache.

So can you understand what she might feel when confronted by a stranger who says 'greetings favoured one! The lord is with you'.

Now the English language can't do justice to the richness of the ancient Greek text there. In fact English makes the angel sound like one of those BBC announcers from the 1940s!

Her initial terror and confusion gives way to complete astonishment, and then submission, and then joy: 'I am known by God. Blessed by God. Present to God. Even mind-blowingly, God is in me'.

Years later, St. Paul was to say, that the mystery continues, the mystery which is Christ in you: the hope of glory. Christ in you, the hope of glory. It's an astounding claim. Let us have no doubt that this God still comes to each one of us - humble and generous - and Mary has gone before us: she is the forerunner, but hear the word of God to Mary as one that is to us as well.

Greetings favoured one: the lord is with you. Yes, you. In a chaotic world, full of uncertainty, weary, anxious, and numbed by COVID, the word comes to us: greetings, favoured one; the lord is with you.

Now, to develop this idea of Christ in you, Christians in the east developed an icon, that shows Mary with her hands extended in a prayer position, and Christ is depicted in a medallion in front of her.

It's called the 'icon of the virgin of the sign'. Christ prays in Mary, who is of course symbolic of the church, and this is just an enormous affirmation: the hidden life of Christ, within us, and the church, and as we grow in awareness of the presence of the indwelling Christ, so we become more, and more, true to the people and the church that we are called to be. Christ-like, and prayerful.

Of course the one that Mary carries is also hope personified. Not even death will hold him. Easter will change everything.

Darkness, in all its manifestations, will find itself deeply challenged by his presence. A whole new world is breaking in, present, and yet still to come. And this is the space that we are invited to inhabit: the kingdom with no end.

Make your home here.

He will come

Will come

Will come like crying in the night

Like blood, like breaking

As the earth writhes to toss him free

He will come

like child.

Amen.