

## Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 20 December 2020

On the previous three Sundays and in our daily mini videos we have spoken about many individuals who collectively tell the story of Advent. In a moment of coffee distraction I jotted down a few of their names such as Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, David, Micah, Isaiah and Daniel from the Old Testament and people such as Zechariah, Elizabeth, John, Joseph and Mary from the New Testament. All of whom in one form or another hear from God and play their part in His great story.

This emphasis on names might simply be an affirmation that the Advent story is a record of real people and events. Or it might go deeper: a suggestion that God calls people by name; that God is the maker of reality through divine speech. That would certainly echo where Revd Jon started our Advent journey with Adam and Eve.

And then there is the name above all names.....Jesus. And Jesus, as we have heard, would be given other names and titles including Immanuel, Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace and Son of the Most High.

There is one further name to add to the list and he appears both in the Old and New Testament....the angel Gabriel.

It was the angel Gabriel who interpreted Daniel's vision of the promised Messiah some 490 years before visiting Zechariah the priest to tell him that his elderly and barren wife Elizabeth would give birth to John the Baptist. And, of course, it is the very same angel Gabriel who visits Mary, greeting her with the word "Greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you"

The Annunciation. The introduction of a key figure in our Advent story – Mary and she is represented by the lighting of the fourth candle in our Advent wreath. [Jane lights 4<sup>th</sup> candle]

This service was filmed one month ago so I have no idea when I watch the recording at some point on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> December whether I will be allowed to do so in church alongside members of the church family, or if I have to watch it at home with Jane because of the lockdown rules. So, whilst I can predict or foretell *what* is going to happen, I'm unsure as to *how*, *where* or exactly *when* the event will take place. An appropriate analogy for the encounter between the angel Gabriel and Mary and, perhaps.

I say that because I've read or heard the story countless times, so I know *what* is going to happen. But I haven't the foggiest idea as to *how*, *where* or exactly *when* it takes place because in the church lectionary, although we are marking it today by the lighting of the fourth candle, the official day of celebration is in March. Regardless, the Annunciation is probably one of the most famously painted scene in western art - yet scripture doesn't tell us a thing except for what was said.

When the angel Gabriel visits Daniel we are told that he was in prayer in the citadel of Susa and Zechariah is on duty in the Temple when he is visited. Yet, we have no idea what Mary is doing when the angel Gabriel appears to her. Is she sewing or making bread or sleeping? Is she indoors or outdoors? Is she alone or surrounded by people who are unaware of what's happening like when Saul encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus?

We simply don't know because the text doesn't tell us. But ironically we can draw comfort from the fact that Mary didn't understand either. She knew she was a virgin. The 'virgin birth' remains a mystery which we simply can not explain, yet we confess it every time we recite the Creed.

To me, that represents a faithful response. It allows for the fact that there's so much more to God's

creation and God's will for our lives that we can possibly ever know or fully understand.

A few days ago at morning prayer we were reminded of a dear church family friend who died of cancer. As she neared the end of her life in the care home, I, along with every other friend who visited her came away uplifted by her cheerfulness. Her whole demeanor spoke eloquently about her attitude towards her life and death, that it would be God's timing which would determine the final time we would meet. She may not have used the actual words but like Mary she chose to respond faithfully to God without having all the answers.

Not once, did she ask, why me? And on one memorable occasion she shared with me and her family her uncertainty about exactly what would happen after she died. But that uncertainty was expressed firmly within a greater and wider context of certainty that she would be called to an eternal life with Christ. She knew the what; but didn't have the answer to the how, where or when.

So as we view the final four videos this week, why not take the time to mull over the readings a little bit more deeply by asking and answering questions of your self.

*How can I best responded to what I have heard today?*

*Where is God at work in my life today?*

*When I next say the Creed, will it mean anything more significant to me?*

For us, the what is known. After all those hundreds of years of waiting by countless prophets the Advent story melds into the Christmas story.....the story which we will be at the heart of our next few services.

Until then, let me take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy Christmas.