

24 December 2023 Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 1: 26-38

*Introduction (at the beginning of the service)*

When you have an important decision to make, what do you do?

Toss a coin?

Phone a friend?

Make a list of pros and cons?

*After Isaiah reading*

Isaiah is one of the advisors of King Ahaz in around 733 BC.

King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel are threatening to invade, and Ahaz is seriously worried. Faced with war which he is not at all sure he can win, he is considering all the options. He could ask the Assyrian king for support. Where is the harm in that? The Assyrians are a powerful people and could offer protection and perhaps wise counsel.

However, Isaiah takes a different stance. Ahaz should rely on God. 'Remember Gideon', he proposes. Faced with an attack from an enormous army, Gideon earnestly asks God for help. God tells him to call up *all* his fighting men, 10,000 of them, and then reduces the number until there are only 300 men left. How can such a tiny army vanquish the enemy? Gideon gives each man a trumpet and a jar with a torch inside. They attack under cover of darkness. When he gives the sign, each soldier blows his trumpet and breaks his jar so that the light shines out. The Midianites, thinking that each trumpet and torch is at the head of a company of soldiers, are terrified. They run! Gideon and his soldiers take chase and win a great victory!

Ahaz can't bring himself to trust God.

He makes his decision. He sends messengers to the king of Assyria swearing loyalty and asking him to save Jerusalem. He thinks it would be a clever idea to send a gift, so he takes gold and silver items from the temple, things which had been dedicated to God, and sends them too. (see 2 Kings for the details).

While Isaiah's message to Ahaz is eminently clear: don't rely on the Assyrians, have faith in God, everything will be alright, ... there is so much more in what he says. There will be light in the darkness. A child will be born who will be called Immanuel (7:14). A very exceptional

child, who will have great authority and wisdom, and who will establish unending peace. "His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" Under his rule, there will be justice for all and protection for the weak. This is far more than advice against invasion.

Ahaz achieves what he set out to do. His kingdom is protected from attack from the north. The Assyrians take more and more control of his kingdom. God, our own true God, is sidelined.

Gideon makes an eminently wise decision. He begs God for help and then follows his instructions to the letter. Result. Ahaz makes a political decision which perhaps saves his skin at the time, but God is neglected, ignored, rejected. A calamity.

## Reading 2

Here is the beautiful story of Mary.

Have you ever wondered what sort of girl she is? Milly Molly Mandy or Tracy Beaker? My first thought was that she must have been a perfect baby, a delightful toddler (tantrums? Never!) a helpful little girl, always running errands for her mother without ever complaining. My second thought, prompted by Carol's list of women in the Bible the other week, is that she is probably feisty, resourceful and not averse to confrontation at times! Not a timid mouse, but a strong and faithful believer. We know that life is not going to be easy for her. As Simeon tells her, a sword will pierce through her soul.

Meeting the Angel Gabriel, she is scared at first, of course. Yet she is not so petrified that she doesn't wonder what he is talking about. Why is *she* blessed? She is brave enough to ask how she can become pregnant. She gets her explanation.

Mary is a thinker. She must be aware of what happens to girls who become pregnant before they are married. At the very least, she will be an outcast, at worst, she may be stoned to death. No benefits for her.

However, this is daring Mary! She doesn't toss a coin, phone a friend, or make a list of pros and cons. She decides immediately, accepts the plan God has for her, and declares her total faith. She will do whatever she is asked. What stunning trust! What extraordinary obedience! What an exquisite challenge to all of us! We'll leave her amazed, excited, brimming over with joy and praising God, and perhaps a little apprehensive of what lies in store for her and her holy baby.

We all face challenging decisions, even if we are not presidents or kings. Anyone here had a visit from an angel? Have *you* got a direct line to Isaiah? The angel Gabriel doesn't often attend services at Holy Trinity Sunningdale as far as I am aware.

Look around. Who can we call on when we are at our wits end?

We do have a handy guide book, populated with people like us; people facing all the problems of life; filled with beautiful poetry to inspire us; roaring with the pumping heart of our Lord God to comfort, heal and then, gently but firmly, show us the right way to go. Look around again. We do have wise friends to consult, sitting here now, committed to God's work and eager to help in any way we can. And the wisest and most reliable friend? The Holy Spirit. The gift from God who can speak to us through the Bible, through our friends around us now, in our dreams and in our prayers.

The carol Good King Wenceslas doesn't at first sight look as though it has anything to do with Mary. But look past the poor man, the grandeur of the King, and consider the little page. He is as obedient and unassuming as Mary, trusting his master, doing what he is ordered, following faithfully in his footsteps, and asking for help when he can't manage. Let's sing.

**Fleur Pelly**