

Text: Luke 1:26-47

Sunday 8th December 2019

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Of all the seasons in our year, Christmas-time is probably the one that has the most traditions, is it not? More than Easter, more than birthdays and anniversaries, we all have expectations of how Christmas will go, we have set ideas of what should happen and when. You may have set ideas about who should go downstairs first to see if the presents have arrived, or when the presents should be opened, or what should be worn on the day. Then there's the issue of when you will eat Christmas dinner – if you're willing to participate, let's do a quick straw poll by a show of hands: whose families eat between noon to 2pm; then 2pm to 4pm, then anyone around 4pm or later?

In my family, when to eat has been an issue in previous years because normally it would be about 2pm, but a few years ago, my middle sister asked for a later time because of seemingly important reasons like visiting the in-laws and wanting her kids to be awake for the meal. My youngest sister and I just about had a heart-attack over the idea of moving Christmas dinner back to three o'clock, so we eventually compromised on 2.30pm, and I had to change my set ideas on how Christmas should be, because sometimes our set ideas need to change.

Our reading today from Luke's gospel is a familiar one to many of us: the angel Gabriel brings a message from God to Mary about the upcoming birth of Jesus. Even this early into Advent, I've told the story a number of times – so it's easy to gloss over the dynamics of this event...

and to reduce it to something nice and familiar. But in all honesty, this isn't a nice comfortable story, it is really quite unsettling, because Mary and Joseph are engaged – they have their plan, their set ideas, for how life will work out: I wonder if they were buzzing with excitement at being engaged, and if Joseph was busy building the house that they would live in together, and was Mary discussing with her friends what the wedding day would be like and what it would be like being married to Joseph and whether children might come along one day.

And then suddenly, out of the blue, they are asked to change their set ideas for how life will go. Gabriel arrives with a message that God wants to involve Mary and Joseph in His plans and purposes for the whole world. But the message from God is a challenging invitation...

– Mary is asked to carry a baby that will be called the Son of God, a baby that will be given the throne of David by the Lord God, and this baby will reign over a kingdom that will be eternal and all encompassing. This message from God is a really big ask – this message is going to thoroughly upend Mary and Joseph’s plans for their future.

What’s more, this invitation from God is going to result in Mary and Joseph facing scandal and humiliation, probably for the rest of their lives, because everyone will know that Mary was pregnant before the wedding day, and everyone will know she became pregnant after being away from Joseph for 3 months – that’s going to raise a lot of questions about the identity of the father. Their set ideas for life will be forever replaced if they accept this invitation from God.

So, this story is no nice, comfortable story. Sure, we let the kids think that, but in reality, it is both gut-wrenching and awe-inspiring. In the midst of a cosmic story about how God will set the world aright through the coming of His Son, the promised Messiah, we find a very moving invitation. And like I was saying last week, on every page of Scripture, we are invited to consider how the cosmic story of what God is up to in the world brings us an invitation for today as well.

So, let me ask you this: as we count down the weeks to Christmas and so approach the end of another year, what has God been saying to you these past months? The Christmas story clearly shows that God is the living, ever-present God, and as such He is frequently inviting us into His plans and purposes – He might have spoken to you during a church service, or a conversation with a friend,

or something you read or experienced in recent months – but be assured, God has been speaking to you. And if we have been attentive, then we might have heard some of what He has been whispering to our hearts. So, what has God been speaking to you about? What has been His message to You this past year?

Or what about us as a congregation? Amidst the change, amidst the uncertainty of the future, what has God been saying to us collectively? Where has been the encouragement, where has been the challenge? What has God by His Spirit been impressing upon us as a congregation?

Now, I realise I'm putting you on the spot with that question, but I'm not looking for an answer...

by the time you reach the door, which might be a relief to you. But maybe in these final weeks of the year, as we go about our set ideas for Christmas, as we ponder the Christmas message afresh, a message that brought encouragement, challenge, and an invitation, maybe we can take some time in these final weeks and reflect upon what God's invitation to us has been.

Now, if you have something you'd like to share on that, particularly for us as a congregation, then please speak with me, or speak with one of our team conveners. We interviewed them a few weeks' back for Guild Sunday and any one of us would be happy to hear you out.

Now as we ponder God's invitation to us, and find Him challenging the set ideas for our individual and collective lives, then we'll likely be faced with a choice akin to Mary's, so how did Mary respond?

She said: 'I am the Lord's servant...May your word to me be fulfilled.' (Luke 1:38) In other passages we see how Joseph reacts and the end product is similar: in both Mary and Joseph, we see an openness to the invitation of God, and a trust in His plans and power. They both evidence an open trust in God, an open trust in the invitation of God to be part of His plans and purposes for the world. This could show an open trust, such that they are willing to put aside their set ideas for life and embrace a new life from God.

And once again, we are invited to consider how the divine story affects our story. God has been speaking to you this year, He has been whispering a particular message to you, and the question is – will we take up God’s invitation to a life we never anticipated? In this moment of choice, how will we respond? Will we be like Mary, with an open trust in God, in His plans and power?

Now as I outlined earlier, this is not simply a nice invitation from God, saying: “oh, would you like a baby?” Because Mary saying “yes” to God’s invitation would mean saying “yes” to ridicule and contempt for being pregnant whilst unmarried in a small town, a town probably as full of gossips as anywhere else. And Mary would have known this at the time of God’s invitation, yet she still said, “May your word to me be fulfilled.” It is surely one of the most courageous statements ever said...

to sign up to something that will bring heartache, even suffering. Her openness to pay such a price, to even lose some happiness, to lose something she valued; there's part of me that can never get my head around that, to say "yes" to that particular invitation, is so very inspiring.

In comparison to that, are the things that God is asking of us, quite so hard? In light of Mary's example, an example that would foreshadow her Son's example, though His was of a magnitude much greater, but in light of Mary's example, can we really still keep making excuses? Or will we embrace God's invitation, no matter how it might change our set ideas for our lives?

I could give you any number of examples from my own life, either from over the years or from this past year...

when I have made the wrong choice, when I was not prepared to pay the cost, but which now, looking back, I so wish that I had: that nudge from God to make sure that I prioritised time with Him, because when I didn't I grew weary, hope dimmed, perspective blurred; or there's that challenge from God, quite frequently, on how I parent or how I treat my wife, and the need then to apologise, to seek His wisdom, and commit to a different way of life all because I keep ignoring Him. Or there's the invitation to speak about by faith to someone, and too often the times even I turn it down, and then the opportunity never arises again.

Friends, as I've said, God has been speaking to you. He communicates through His Word, through His people, by His Spirit and in the midst of the circumstances of life. If we have been attentive,...

we might have heard His invitation, but now the question is, what will we do with it – how will we respond? Will it be like Mary, with an open trust in the plans, the power and the love of God?

One final observation about Mary's story. After Mary trusts God's invitation, it leads her on to sing her own song, and it begins **with these words: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." (Luke 1: 46-47)**

Some time has passed since that initial visit from the angel, and Mary has had time to dwell upon and maybe experience the effect of her trusting response in God's invitation. Yet it feels like there's a change in the dynamics now. Before, in the encounter with the angel, Mary's response was quite muted,...

not necessarily grudging, for there was an open trust, but maybe a little uncertainty because of all that's going to happen.

Yet now, when Mary is with Elizabeth, and after some time has passed, there is a different tone, a different feel, to Mary – the trust is still clearly there, she still trusts in the goodness and purposes of God, but now, now, we see in her a joy that spills over into song, a song that will be written about and which will inspire music and drama in generations to come. God brought the invitation – Mary responded with open trust – and in time, joy came and an impact on future generations as well.

Friends, individually and corporately, God has brought His invitation to us this year...

It could be a costly invitation, maybe not to the extent of Mary's, but nonetheless still costly to us. And, as I've said, we then have a choice of how to respond – will we too respond with open trust? For if we are willing to trust, and only if we trust, then the joy and the impact that was Mary's, can be ours as well.

Now, God doesn't promise an easy life, He doesn't promise that if we respond with open trust that the invitation won't be costly or leave us with unanswered questions; after all, Mary was to go on and experience some degree of difficulty and hardship herself, even before Jesus went to the Cross; she still lost a husband, she still worried what her grown-up Son was doing; though the angel called her blessed she knew hardship. But she also knew joy – and one day that joy...

would forever remain with her, as she placed her trust in the plans of God, in the very Person of God who was her Son, that babe who was also her Messiah and Saviour; she would place her trust in Him and in His invitation, and in Him she found a joy that could never be taken from her.

Friends, God issues His invitation – His invitation to a life you could never dream nor imagine, both individually and corporately. He is speaking, has spoken, and if we are to share in the joy of Mary, then we too must respond with open trust, we must make room for this Christ-child, just as Mary had to make room for Him in her life as well.

And let's take a moment to think about that impact Mary had on future generations. Many of us would like to see our congregation and young people come to own the Christian faith for themselves; we hope to have...

an impact upon them as well, just like Mary. But in today's culture, we can't simply talk at them or point to words on a page, because they simply do not care. Yet, when these words from Scripture are combined with your personal story of how it has made a difference, well then they might listen and heed what is shared.

Now, I don't know all your stories much yet, but when on placement, it was so sad that few people could share their experience of what their faith had done in their life; they could tell me that they came to share for X number of years and what jobs they had done, but too few could share how their relationship with God had shaped their character, and what they had seen God do in their lives individually or collectively. Why was that? Why did they

have so little testimony to share? Was it because of a lack of trust and response to God?

If we want to impact the next generation, then we must have testimony to share, stories of what God has done in and through us. And if we can't share anything, then maybe it's time to start asking why, and we might need to **begin with this question: have you accepted Jesus as Your Saviour and Lord? Have you made room for Him in Your life?**

I asked a question several times at the start of my time here, but I'll keep asking it, just in case today is the day it finally sinks in for someone: Have you responded to Him with open trust? Have you accepted Him? Have you made room for Him to come into Your life?

Since coming here, I've heard of a few stories from folks in our congregation who were attending church for decades and were even members, but who had never actually responded to this question. So, how can we tell if we have accepted Jesus?

Well as Mary said, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." Can you truly say that of Jesus? Is Jesus real to you? Is He so real to you, and the relationship He offers you, is this so real that in the depth of your being your soul glories in God and rejoices in Him?

Can we say like Mary, 'I am the Lord's servant...May your word to me be fulfilled'? Is our heart for the Lord's Kingdom and the Lord's priorities, for the Lord's will and word to be fulfilled?...

Because if your attitude to Jesus is a little bit ambivalent; if His will is not what you aspire to live out; if the core of your identity is something other than as a child of God, then maybe you still have some room to give over to Jesus?

This Christmas time, Jesus stands in our midst and He issues His invitation to come into our lives. He doesn't promise an easily life; in fact, accepting His invitation may well lead to a more difficult life. But we'll never know the joy of the Lord, or the impact upon generations that Mary made, if we keep Jesus at arms' length and fail to make room for Him in every area of our individual and corporate lives. Friends, my hope, is that we will respond like Mary, allowing our set ideas for our lives to fall away if need be, and with an open trust, take up God's invitation to a life, to a joy, to an impact, we could never have imagined. May it be so. Let us pray.