

**Pastoral letter, Advent 4,
December 20th, 2020**

« Joy to the World »

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

We are family, aren't we? So, I've just been out this morning, walking up from home and back down the River Don again. The sun shone in a clear blue sky on the pigeons swooping about in flocks. The ducks for a moment thought I was the « duck man », bringing them bread and peas. They rushed to me as I stood on the bridge in his usual spot. I was a great disappointment to them!

I called in for a takeaway coffee and pastry, which I ate as I strolled along, masked of course. Runners and dog walkers exchanged nods and smiles with me. A man in a van, jumping the traffic lights, nearly ran over me. I felt grateful to be alive and gave thanks for God's goodness to us all, in the world he has created for us to enjoy and look after.

I wonder how we all are?

Christmas can be such an emotional time for us. We look back at Christmases past and remember with sadness those we have loved who have died. Precious memories. Enjoy them and thank God for them.

I think we all have worries about family and friends too. As the Christmas cards drop through the letter box there is good news and sad news. How do we reply to people's anxieties at this Christmas time? At the same time, we notice the passing of time as we ourselves get older and some of our hopes and dreams for the future may be slipping away. And still we sing:

« Joy to the world, the Lord has come, the earth receives her King! ».

As I write, there are seven days to go before Christmas Day. Let's look together at the beginning of Luke's gospel. In a Sunday service, we can rarely look at a whole chapter of the Bible, but here in a letter I think it's allowed! If you can read Luke chapter 1 all the way through you'll get an overview of what's happening.

Luke starts by saying he has made a careful study of all the eyewitness reports of the new thing that God has done for us.

At verse 5, Luke introduces a country priest called Zechariah. He's elderly, and he and his wife Elizabeth are childless. Read for yourself how Zechariah won the priests' lottery for entering the « Holy of Holies » in the Temple to burn incense on the altar. It was a once in a lifetime honour.

Alone in this most holy place, Zechariah sees the angel Gabriel appear to the right of the altar. (The beauty is in the detail.). Gabriel reassures Zechariah and gives him the good news, which is actually quite staggering. His elderly wife is to conceive a son who is to be equal to, if not more significant a prophet than Isaiah!

In « The Message » translation, Zechariah's response to the message is very blunt:

He says to the angel:

« Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman. »

Small wonder then that Zechariah is struck dumb until John's actual birth.

On the other hand, his wife Elizabeth is delighted with the news. Elizabeth keeps her miraculous pregnancy under wraps until Mary her young unmarried cousin comes to visit. As the baby John leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb on hearing Mary's voice, so Elizabeth prays a blessing over Mary and shares the joy they both feel.

We are much more familiar with Mary's story, aren't we? Her quiet acceptance of Gabriel's message is amazing: « I am the Lord's servant. Let it happen as you have said. »

Do any of these experiences ring bells with you?

I'm not saying anything that hasn't been said before. It's just so extraordinary that God takes « ordinary » people like you and me and works with and through us to show that God works daily miracles through ordinary people. Most of the time, we're not aware of the impact of our own lives upon other people. But maybe you could look back over this last year and pray through some the stuff that's happened in your life. Have you seen your prayers answered? Have they been answered differently from what you were hoping for? How can we help each other on our journeys through life?

I offer you a prayer for ourselves which may be helpful:

Lord, we pray for ourselves: sometimes we forget!
Lord, help us to recognise you in our world.
Lord, help us to love you more every day.
Lord, help us to know what to do for you,
How to share the good news of your love for everyone,
especially at this time of year.
Lord, reach out again to us and heal our hurts,
Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.
Amen.

And still we sing, « Joy to the world, the Lord is come ».

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore, Amen.

May we all be able to celebrate the coming of Jesus as a tiny baby
into the world this Christmas.

Sue Stanworth, (Tel 07989 533075)