

Reflection for Sunday 20th December 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Many of you will have noticed that in the pew Bibles here at church - the Good News Translation - there's a wee introduction to each book of the Bible.

The introduction to the gospel of Luke says this: "*The Gospel of Luke* presents Jesus as both the promised Saviour of Israel and as the Saviour of all mankind. *Luke* records that Jesus was called by the Spirit of the Lord to "preach the good news to the poor" and this gospel is filled with a concern for people with all kinds of need. The note of *joy* is also prominent in *Luke*, especially in the opening chapters that announce the coming of Jesus."

We are very familiar with the opening chapters of Luke - or we may think that we are! - as they are read in the church services leading up to Christmas every year. But it's a great experience to read the first two or three chapters of Luke in one sitting, as those themes of God's salvation and good news for the poor and needy leap off the pages. It's also wonderful to take time to savour Mary's song of praise - which is sung regularly as part of worship in some denominations - as it celebrates God's intervention in human affairs, in turning things upside down (or perhaps I should say 'right side up') as he comes to the help of those who seek him. It's a song full of joy.

But joy is not the only emotion experienced by Mary, or by others who are met by angels in these first chapters of Luke. Quite understandably, there's also a pretty good dollop of *fear*. Mary is initially "deeply troubled" by the angel's message to her - her joy doesn't come until later, when she meets her relative Elizabeth and her call is confirmed by Elizabeth's declaration that Mary is "the most blessed of all women" and that her child will also be blessed. What comfort it must have been for Mary to hear Elizabeth's words.

The Angel Gabriel also brings words of comfort and reassurance to Mary, as do other unnamed angels who appear elsewhere in Scripture. Gabriel simply says, "*Do not be afraid.*"

"*Do not be afraid.*" Within the Advent narratives these words of assurance are spoken each time an angel or angels appear. Zechariah, the father-to-be of John the Baptist, is the first to receive such a message from the Angel Gabriel. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah - God has heard your prayer." Then Mary: "Do not be afraid, Mary - God has been gracious to you." In the gospel of *Matthew*, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph, and says, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." In *Luke*, the shepherds hear, "Do not be afraid - I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all people." (There's that note of joy again.)

The consistent message of the angels is: "*Don't be afraid. God is with you. God has things under control.*"

So, what do we make of this message today? As I was reflecting on today's readings, I thought: "This is a message we need to hear again and again, both individually and collectively." Communally, perhaps this year - a year which has been full of anxiety and sorrow for many people throughout the world - we particularly need to hear these words of reassurance. God is fully aware of the trials and tribulations of human life and is with us in them. Individually, too, each of us know times of challenge, sorrow or fear - and God's message to us remains, "Don't be afraid." As Mary's song of praise reminds us, there is a bigger picture.

How can we be sure? The Angel Gabriel reminds Mary to look for signs of God's promise already fulfilled in her life and others' lives. Gabriel points to Mary's cousin: "Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. For there is nothing that God cannot do." Look at what God can do, and has done already.

I'm currently reading a great book by a Jesuit priest named James Martin: *My Life with the Saints*. In a chapter about Mary, James Martin writes about his experience of meeting with people who come to him for spiritual direction. He writes, "Even the devout sometimes doubt the presence of God in their lives. But usually all it takes for them to regain their trust is a simple question: 'Hasn't God been with you in the past?' Often they will think for a while and say something like 'Now that you mention it, each time I thought I couldn't go on, I found that something or someone helped me to do so. I really felt God was right there with me.'" James Martin suggests that "more often than not, God is most easily found by looking back over our lives, our weeks, or our days, and saying, 'Yes, *there* was God."

"Do not be afraid." Today's passages from Luke's gospel and from Psalm 89 remind us that there is a bigger picture than we can fully comprehend. When we are fearful, we can look back at God's involvement in human history, recall his promises to his people - many of which have already been fulfilled in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus - and recall points in our lives, or in the lives of others, when we have thought, "*There* was God." Another name for Jesus is "Immanuel" - which means "God with us" - and this reminds us to look for God in our present experience, too. God also offers us hope for the future. For the people of Israel, the promised hope was the Messiah - the descendant of David whose kingdom would never end. God promises us that we may participate in that kingdom through the help of the Holy Spirit, growing in the knowledge and love of his Son, and looking forward, with hope, to eternal life.

Hope, peace, love and joy - so much to celebrate and give thanks to God for, this and every Christmas!