

In the name of the Father...

It seems like only yesterday that we sitting here on Advent Sunday reflecting on the potential of the Advent season to encourage us to watch and wait for signs of the Kingdom of God amongst us. Many of us have spent some time during Advent thinking about where we experience God's Kingdom now. The moments we are aware not only of God presence, but of God's reign and wisdom pervading our earthly understanding of the world. Where do we recognise God? Last week Father Andrew reminded us that the simple truth of God's Kingdom is that God loves us; God desires for us to believe this and to have the courage to love ourselves!

I have been thinking a lot about what this means during the week – on Thursday night I turned on the Television to see the second half of this week's episode of *Rev*. I have a love/hate relationship with this show and am never sure whether I will enjoy it. For those of you have seen it – *Rev* is a comedy on BBC about a Vicar in a Central London Parish and deals with the day-to-day moments your average London Vicar (or Curate) might come up against. The last two weeks the characters have been dealing with different situations where they have been challenged to tell the truth about who they are– not only to someone else but also to themselves. Last week's episode was about addictions, money and possessions and whether we recognise the power that they have over us – in a comical way, of course. This week however the theme was much more poignant – the male pastoral assistant sat before the Archdeacon to ask that he might explore training for ordination and the Archdeacon said 'Are you still in a relationship with another man' The pastoral assistant said 'yes'. The Archdeacon says well I cannot recommend you for training at which point the Pastoral Assistant says to him 'so how is Robert these days?'

The scene then changes and the Archdeacon is sitting before the Prime ministers appointments committee in relation to his appointment as a Bishop at which point he is asked the same question which he asked the Pastoral Assistant "Are you still in a relationship with another man' and the scene changes. The Archdeacon then returns to the parish church where he meets the Vicar who asks 'How are you?' The Archdeacon responds 'I think I have just ended any chance I had of becoming a Bishop – and you know – I think that is OK?' At the same time the Vicar and his wife are dealing with their own relationship issues and their desire to have a child....The final scene has all the main characters sitting in the church each on their own – each with their own thoughts – each having to own 'who they are' – and each coming to terms with the fact - that is OK!

Knowing that we are loved means being honest about who we are, and being OK with that. Whether that is about the kind of parent we are, the kind of friend, whether is about our sexuality or the career we want to have.

Whatever makes us who we are – that is what God loves – and God wants us to love that too. And when that happens then we glimpse the Kingdom of God not only in ourselves but in others around us.

And then today, on this fourth Sunday of Advent we encounter Mary. Like those before her who have been informed of a most unlikely impending birth (Sarah and Abraham, Elizabeth and Zechariah), Mary is astounded by the amazing power of God. Yet while Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth in glowing terms ("righteous...living blamelessly"), Mary is simply "a virgin." Mary, greeted by an angel of God as "full of grace," as "favoured one," is not described as extraordinarily holy but as an ordinary person like each of us. She's a small-town girl, with her life moving along the quiet, ordinary path of an arranged marriage. Not that being an "ordinary" girl in a small village makes Mary without spirit or strength., and we never really know for sure what Mary is thinking or feeling, at least until she sings her song of joy at Elizabeth's house. The power of the words of the Magnificat are that they seem to be an expressed moment in Mary's difficult journey when she is able to come to terms with who she is, and what God has asked her to do – and she is OK with that!

The Kingdom of God however is bigger than this – it is not only about us, or Mary - the key to the Magnificat (and in many ways our reflections on the grace and love of God) is that it's really all about God and what God is doing.

So what is God doing? God is transforming the World. God is showing us love in a way that has never been demonstrated before. And God is doing it through us! God transforms the world slowly and painfully because it is changed through our word and actions. So the great moment of the Incarnation – the birth of the Saviour and teacher who is Christ the Lord - could only happen because of that ordinary girl who says yes to God.

In the same way the transformation of our world can only come from our being honest with ourselves and then getting on with what it is to be ourselves – the loved children of God, as we are for all our faults and fabulousness.

Advent has been a chance to think about this news – to focus on how we live out the Kingdom of God – both as individuals and as a community. This won't happen without us and it has to happen because the world needs it – desperately and perhaps today more than ever.

The risk is however that Advent leads us to have a fantastic and inspiring Mission Statement and vision for our lives; but if they are only statements, or even hopes - it is not the transforming power of the Kingdom of God. We are not called to be only a community of prayer and reflection. We are equally called to be people of grace – that is people who put their love into action.

In this Advent season in particular, we're caught, suspended between fear and hope, on the edge of a new day but facing formidable challenges: war, poverty, persistent economic crises, harm to the earth...so many problems, and many of them mirrored in our own personal lives in broken relationships, ill health, money worries, troubled consciences. And yet the promise of Luke's message to us today is that God will and has changed all of that through the reign of God's Kingdom. We are already a transformed people – if only we take the hold of the promise we hear in the song of Mary.

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...*

*He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree.
He has filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich He has sent empty away.*

God's kingdom turns our understanding of ourselves, our community and our world upside down – not to unsettle us, but for us to realise that it is through us, following God's will, that the world will be transformed.

On Friday, I received a message from Australia from a friend who said she had just found out she was diagnosed with an illness. She was fearful of telling people because they thought it would change how people saw her and responded to her. We talked about what it meant to be made in the image of God – for if we truly are made in God's image, then an illness may or may not define our abilities but it is not who we are. It led me to think about Mary again – a girl from a small town with her life all mapped out – in many ways her life fully defined - who said 'yes' to God and transformed the history of the world!.

Maybe the Mission Statement for this Church and even for our lives should simply be - And so, let it be with us, according to God's will.

Amen