

Sermon for Advent 4, 2021
Sawtell Anglicans
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When I was a child of about 4 years of age, I bit the dentist. His name was Dr Wild by the way and he looked a bit wild and scary. He hurt me so I bit him. My mother was embarrassed and soon after we started attending a different dentist. She would retell this story frequently at family gatherings over future decades whenever the topic of dentists or doctors came up. It wasn't until the story came up soon after my mother died that my brothers and sister gave me their perspective on the story, that was quite different to one of shame and embarrassment.

So our perspective is important. Shame and embarrassment, or liberation?
Fear and anxiety, or hopeful confidence?

Mary, a young, unmarried teenage girl is pregnant. Shame and embarrassment, or honour and grace?

There are some hard truths in the scripture readings and prayers of Advent: God's Kingdom has not finally come: there will be a judgement day.

Yet, as I said, perspective is important. We don't hear the news about the second coming "out of the blue" – we hear it as believers who already know about Christ's first coming as a child at Bethlehem.

This affects our perspective – so we approach his second coming not with fear but with expectation and hope.

In our Gospel verses today we hear of the mutually supportive encounter between Mary and Elizabeth.

I'm sure that both of them were affected by much uncertainty, anxiety and probably fear. Who would these children be? What does it all mean?

It's such a human scene that two women sought out one another's company in the face of shared worries about the future.

Perspective is powerful. So despite their worries and anxieties, they each are encouraged by the other, and respond, not with added fear, but with song:

Luke 1:41

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

Luke 1:46

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour ...

They both encourage and support one another and this can change our perspective. For Mary, this especially promoted in her a deep a trust in God, which in turn led to her opening herself to his will for her life.

As Bishop Stephen Cottrell puts it in his poem, *Annunciation*:

There is only one thing that prevents
The gentle movement, heaven to earth:
Not the fear which godly greeting brings,
....
Nor empty tomb, nor barren heart,

....

Nor the silence where there could be praise,

....

But the lack of trust that what was promised

Might in human flesh be born, achieved

How happy she who for us all, believed ...

(Annunciation: A poem. Stephen Cottrell, 2014)

It was Mary's trust in God's promises that made Jesus' birth possible. She decided to approach what otherwise were fearful events from the perspective of trust.

Do we need a change of perspective?

Are we so focused on Christmas, that we've neglected some of the more difficult truths God has for us at Advent?

The past two years have been consumed by COVID challenges – focused on survival, crisis management. But do we need to reset our perspective / priorities?

Together with the vacancy of a Rector – has this led, unconsciously, to an “on hold” mentality that needs to be challenged?

How are we going to reconnect with people and with God's mission in new ways in 2022? Whether we have a Rector or not? Whether COVID still restricts us or not?

Where in our lives and church community do we need more trust, in order to develop a fresh perspective, and open ourselves to God's possibilities?

The Dutch priest Henri Nouwen tells the story of a boy who went to visit a sculptor's studio with his father. On his first visit there was a large block of stone in the centre of the room. The boy noticed that the sculptor was standing there staring at it reflectively. On his subsequent visits the boy saw the block of stone gradually transform. Eventually a beautiful sculpture of a lion emerged. “Daddy”, said the boy, “How did he know there was a lion in the stone?”.

The sculptor worked on trust – trust that he had the qualities, gifts, abilities and much more, to perceive what was possible within the stone. From a Christian perspective this means cooperating with God’s grace and creative power to help reveal what God intends for those around us, for our communities and the wider world.

This season of Advent has a dual focus: preparing for the annual celebration of our Lord’s first coming (Christmas) but also a focus on his coming again.

The word Advent – comes from the Latin *ad venio*:

Ad = against; venio = come. Come against. At Advent we come against God, or are confronted by God’s truth which is sometimes difficult to hear. So Advent, if we take it seriously, isn’t an easy season.

Yet we can live expectantly and trustfully praying “Thy Kingdom Come” in faith and confidence as we labour and prepare for that coming.

Armed with the knowledge of our salvation in Christ, we can approach the final fulfilment of God’s Kingdom as his faithful ones.

Prayer (from The Canterbury Book of New Parish Prayers)

Heavenly Father, at his first coming your Son was born in obscurity, and he calls us now to be awake and watchful for his coming again in glory. Open our eyes, and the eyes of all people, to see his action in the world. Strengthen us in our faith, that we may trust in him, know his presence in our daily lives, and fashion our souls to be places where his coming righteousness will be at home, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.