



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday of Advent-Year A-December 22nd 2019

Readings: Isaiah 7: 10-14, Psalm 23, Romans 1: 1-7,

Matthew 1: 18-24

Patriarchs, prophets, Forerunner – the long line of Salvation History circles down through the millennia until it finds its final focus here. Not in some great tribal elder, full of years and wisdom and prestige. Not in some wild ecstatic desert dweller and powerful revealer of the mind of God. Not in some monarch or princeling. Not in some great counsellor of state. Not in some imperial city or gorgeous palace. Not in some state capital and seat of power. Not in some imposing edifice of state or some gorgeous and elaborate shrine of prayer. But here in the quiet obscurity of a one horse northern town, bordering on the outside world, distinguished by its historical irrelevance and a population equivalent of a small Cornish village where everyone would have known each other and your neighbour would have known what you had for breakfast before you put your bowl in the dishwasher.

And to this apparently ill-matched, unfamous, hitherto unimportant young woman and her older betrothed. An unlikely pair with what would seem to be an unlikely story. If you were God and going to set your story of the final act of cosmic redemption somewhere and give it characters with some heft – this is not the scene, the set or the cast list you would have chosen to impress the mind of fallen Man. Where is the glamour? Where

is the glory? Where is the fanfare of trumpets to accompany such momentous events?

Luckily, you and I are not God and He, with the inestimable benefit of hindsight, now appears to us to know better.

As we enter the final week of the Season of Longing, of the Advent Hope – in which is encapsulated the recapitulation of the human story, our recognition of our need for God and that long journey into the Presence – everything circles down around the particular, the ordinary of human life and the extraordinary part in it of God's grace and mercy.

Nazareth is transfixed by scandal. The old fool has been taken in by 'butter wouldn't melt in her mouth Miss Goody Two-Shoes'. The village gossip machines are in overdrive. Rejection and punishment are the only fit ending to such a grievous betrayal of social values and family life.

Such would have been the background to today's Gospel account. The woman we have, in our pilgrimage, come to know and love as our mother and Mother of the Church. The woman we know fulfilled that mysterious prophecy to be both virgin and mother. The grace-filled Lady who accompanies our prayers and intercedes for us. The young girl who has come to be the Queen of Heaven, Ark of the Covenant, Mother of Mercy, Hope of the Nations.

In today's Gospel is in deep dilemma and difficulty because of her faithful response to the will of God, imparted to her by the divine messenger, Gabriel. Her distress is compounded by that of her betrothed who has to face or face down the social contempt and ostracism of a man apparently betrayed in deepest consequence. (In our own permissive and promiscuous times, we know how difficult it is for testosterone fuelled, tribal and territorial man to come to grips with bringing up another man's child. The situation for 1st century Galilean villagers would compound that to the nth degree.)

We read the Annunciation story with 2,000 years of hindsight.

We take our cue – that all is well and serene – from the long history of

beautiful artistic depictions of the scene.

The reality is far from that. The conception and forming of the promised child of wonder take place in the midst of domestic turmoil and social sensation. At the centre of this storm is a young girl, dedicated to God, prepared by His prevenient grace, to undertake the most significant ministry and calling in human history. Mary is to become the Mother of God's Son – a claim which, of itself, would have had the enthusiastic stone-throwers limbering up. That she remains calm, who knows what trepidations filled her heart, is a clue to her faith and a key to her courage. That Joseph was the right man is evidenced by his decision to be not outraged and vengeful but discreet and kind. This too took faith and self-denial.

And then the angels came. The dream that freed him to fulfil his part in our salvation. The guardian of the Son of God. The quiet faithful rock of the Holy Family.

In this the final Advent Sunday it would be good for us to reconnect – not with the bucolic fantasy of European artworks of the Annunciation and its consequences, but with the gritty, dusty, challenging, dangerous, nerve wracking, faith testing weeks and months and years that lay ahead of these two great servants of God, key players in the drama of our salvation. This is the man – not just a background prop at the Nativity - who stood in for the fatherhood of God.

This is the woman whose combination of purity and steel enabled her to keep her promise, endure the insults, make the journey, survive the persecution, make home in exile, live years with the secret in obscurity, be swept up in the national fame, see the triumph, stand by the Cross – be transported by the Third Day- watch at the Pentecost as the same Holy Spirit who had overshadowed her all those years ago, birthed the Church in fire and sent her into the world to present Christ – the Coming One whose Advent Mary's faithfulness had made possible.

Those whom God calls seldom have it easy.

But in the end, they have all that matters.

Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blest is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen