



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Advent-Year B-December 17th 2023

Readings: Isaiah 61: 1-2. 10-11, Psalm Luke 1: 46-50. 53-54, 1

Thessalonians 5: 16-24

EXPECTING

There is a word in Italian which captures perfectly the borderline between ‘Waiting’ and ‘Expecting’ .

It is the verb ‘Aspettare’. It means ‘to wait for’ but, as you have heard, it contains within it the implication that the wait will not be in vain. It is filled with expectancy. It exhibits that glorious and empowering virtue of hope.

There are many types of Expectation, of course. The great Victorian novelist, Charles Dickens, does expectation in spades. At its most depressing end is the pitiful figure of Miss Flyte, in Dicken’s greatest novel, Bleak House. She is trapped in a world of false expectation – constantly expecting a verdict from the court that will restore her fortune – a verdict that will never come. Her pitiful half-life, enthralled to the human justice that can never deliver, should be a warning to the wards in the great case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce – the central thread of this tragedy. It is not. They are convinced that they are different and that justice will prevail in the human court and their expectations will be met. Their lives are consumed by this devastating error.

Another form of expecting is exhibited in another Dicken's character, Mr. Micawber from David Copperfield. His mantra that 'something will turn up' is a testimony to his naivete and unreasonable optimism, though, curiously, in the end something does turn up for him.

And, of course, there is the topsy turvy epic of unlikely salvation in Great Expectations' itself. And much more besides.

Humanity is hung out between what might have been and what might yet be. The present is in hock to the future and paralysed before its hypnotic power.

The expectation of the Advent season is rather different. It is more akin to the word we most associate with expecting That is to say a pregnancy.

To say that someone is expecting is generally to acknowledge that she is 'with child'. Being pregnant is, of course, no guarantee of coming to full term with the baby but it is qualitatively different from the Dickensian examples in that there is reasonable expectation that it will. There is also a biological timetable to be met.

In the conception of Advent there is also a timetable to be met, albeit hid from humanity in the mystery of eternity, but met it will be.

The parallels between Advent and pregnancy should not be overblown but we are in the area of substantial similarities. The precious life conceived will grow, nurtured in the dark, until the urgent call of birth and the long slow agony of being translated from the warm comfort of the familiar into the unimaginable glory of a new world. The long process of being and becoming undergoes a radical transformation within the continuum. There is an unbroken pathway, an indisputable continuity and yet an unimaginable difference.

So, when we look forward in the Advent Season, it is with hope and expectation and excitement and anticipation and with words that cannot possibly do justice to what is to come.

There are, of course, any number of pregnant expectings in Scripture. I am always amused and alarmed by the birth of Samuel. When God finally answers Hannah's desperate plea for motherhood, she is so grateful that, once the boy is weaned, she gives him back to God. That is to say that she turns up on the doorstep of the old priest, Eli, who thought she was a drunk then, after explanation, prayed with her and hands him over. Can you imagine that at the presbytery door. The most unlikely babysitting service in the world.

Apart from anything else the Safeguarding Team would have forty fits.

There is of course the decisive double pregnancy of Mary and Elizabeth. One a miracle because age and apparent infertility have one for the hopes of the older woman. The other a miracle because the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit, Parthenogenesis, a virgin birth. The moment of meeting of these two women, the Visitation, is a brief moment of respite for the chief players in the drama of salvation before history roars forward with all its terrible consequences and yet plays into the hands of the divine script of salvation.

Both of these miracle children will be sacrificed on the altar of State Violence and at the behest of sinful man. Both will point the way to redemption.

The Advent Season gives us time to reflect on what has been on the long and often troubled road of Man's existence after the Fall. It encourages to see the pattern of redemption, marked out in the millennia long road to the stable at Bethlehem. But more than that, it enables us to look forward in hope and expectation. We have seen how mysteriously and wonderfully salvation was achieved and the divine cost of the Cross. And know we are encouraged to look towards the far horizon of Faith towards

the Rising Son and the dawning of the eternal day that will sweep us up into eternity and, post parturition of our dying, make us into the children of God, little brothers and sisters of Jesus.

In the light of all that has been, in the travail of what is and in the promise of what will be, we, the born and born again are not unreasonable in having **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**.