

The Service of the Lord's Day Saint Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark

Sunday 23rd December 2018 - Advent 4

Also Anticipating Christmas Eve

Leader: Rev Dr. Barry Brown

We Gather to Worship God

WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE WURUNDJERI PEOPLE

WE STAND AS THE BIBLE IS CARRIED IN TO WORSHIP

INTROIT *Prepare ye the way of the Lord...* (in three parts)

GREETING, WELCOME and CALL TO WORSHIP

WE SING *The advent of our God...* TiS 271 (v 1-3, 6)

1

The advent of our God.
with eager prayers we greet,
and singing hasten on his road
his coming reign to meet.

2

The everlasting Son
was born to make us free;
and he a servant's form put on
to gain our liberty.

3

Let Zion now arise
to greet her infant king,
and gladly take with thankful heart
the peace he comes to bring.

6

Praise to the incarnate Son
who comes to set us free,
with Father, Spirit, ever one
to all eternity.

PRAYERS OF ADORATION and CONFESSION

WORD'S DECLARING GOD'S FORGIVING GRACE

We Listen to God's Word:

AN EARLY WORD, ADVENT CANDLES and SONG TiS 289 v1-4

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent. We light the fourth candle to remember **Mary, the mother of Jesus**. Mary was perplexed to hear from the angel Gabriel that she had been chosen by God to have a son and was to call him Jesus. Yet, she was willing to do what God asked of her, saying: "*Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.*" Later she sang a song of Joy and praise to God, a song we too will sing this morning. We will also celebrate, over Christmas, the story of the birth of Jesus and the role of Mary and Joseph in caring for the child, Jesus.

Prayer: God of promise and fulfillment, we thank you for the people you used to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. We thank you for the prophets, and for John the Baptist. Today we thank you for Mary and her devotion to God and God's purposes. Thank you for the gift of her motherhood, the way she rejoiced in being part of your promises being fulfilled, and for her costly devotion to Jesus throughout the whole of his life. Thank you that she continues to be for us a model of Christian devotion and discipleship. **Amen**

We Sing:

***'Christmas is coming'
the Church is glad to sing
and let the Advent candles
brightly burn in a ring.***

1. The first is for God's promise
to put the wrong things right,
and bring to earth's darkness
the hope of love and light.
Refrain
2. The second for the prophets
who said that Christ would come
with good news for many
and angry words for some.
Refrain
3. The third is for the Baptist
who cried, 'Prepare the way.
be ready for Jesus,
both this and every day.'
Refrain
4. The fourth is for the Virgin,
who mothered God's own Son
and sang how God's justice
was meant for everyone.

Refrain

THE SERVICE OF THE WORD:

A READING FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURE –

Th Book of the prophet, Micah. Chapter 5, Verses 2 to 5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

WE SING *O little town of Bethlehem...* (seated) TiS 316

1

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see you lie!
Above your deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by:
yet, in your dark streets shining
the everlasting light,
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in you tonight.

2

For Christ is born of Mary;
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King
and peace to all on earth.

3

How silently, how silently
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.

No ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

4
O holy child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
their great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Immanuel.

THE GOSPEL according to Saint Luke. Chapter 1, Verses 39 to 45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

WE SING *Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord!* TiS 161

1
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

2
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name - the Lord, the Mighty One.

3
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.

Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

4

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD

'A 3D view of Mary the mother of Jesus'

[The following is a manuscript version of the sermon by Rev Dr Barry Brown, 23rd December 2018]

Introduction

Today, is the fourth Sunday of Advent and we turn our attention to Mary the mother of Jesus. Our focus, because it is still Advent, is on preparation – on discerning how the person of Mary can help us to prepare for Jesus, so that, as the carol puts it, we might be receptive, for, **“where meek souls will receive him, the dear Christ enters in”** (O little town of Bethlehem, TiS 316 v3).

I want to share with you briefly about my preparation for this sermon. From time to time a colleague of mine sends me poems which he has just composed. I'm no poet myself, but I do appreciate the way the poetry of others enables me to have fresh insight into familiar Biblical passages. That was the case this week. I've also reflected on the prayers and meditations in *'Dad and Daughter'* by the Revs Ron and Jennie Gordon.

Last week I was given an early Christmas gift from another friend and colleague, Rev Dr Robert Gallacher. It is a brief book recently completed, with reflections upon icons he has written; including images of three icons that depict Mary the mother of Jesus. I found taking time to look deeply into these icons enabled me to find new ways of understanding Mary, and a new way of praying. One icon, in particular, drew me into a fresh appreciation – Robert's own writing of *The Virgin of Vladimir*, a twelfth century icon that now resides in a gallery in Moscow.

However, I have also engaged in my regular discipline of reading and praying the Biblical text and consulting several commentaries. One author, (Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke*) reminded me that Mary the mother of Jesus is depicted as the ideal Christian, and that Mary is often neglected by Protestants as a

lingering reaction to her perceived deification within Catholicism. I consider there is some truth in this assertion, and that it is something about which we need to be mindful.

A reminder: we are now four weeks into the *Year of Luke* (and Acts). I found it useful to identify Luke's particular perspective on Mary by reading all the passages in Luke that refer to her – and it is very significant, not just in the Luke's Gospel, but also at the opening of Acts. Luke tells us more about Mary than any of the four evangelists. Matthew simply mentions Mary in passing, as the one to whom Joseph is engaged. Matthew and Mark repeat one or two references that are also present in Luke. And John has two sections in which Mary is featured and that are not in any of the other three gospels: (a) Mary and Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2), and (b) The three-way conversation between Jesus, his mother and John the beloved disciple, as Jesus hangs on the cross - *When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home* (John 19:26 – 27).

So, apart from these two important passages in John, almost all we know about Mary the mother of Jesus from the New Testament comes to us from Luke. It is important therefore to consider what Luke wants us to know and understand of this important person.

You may have been wondering about the title I've given to this sermon - '**A 3D view of Mary the mother of Jesus.**' No, I'm not going to produce some kind of apparition of Mary; nor a hologram projection. Rather, I want to emphasize three things that stood out for me as I read through Luke's accounts of Mary: – Devotion, Doxology and Discipleship.

Devotion

Luke is consistent in providing both male and female characters. At the same time he also provides some contrasting characteristics. Mary and Zachariah (the father of John the Baptist) both provide us with *canticles* – prayer-songs of praise. Yet think of the differences. Zachariah is much older, male, holds high religious office, is probably influential and to some degree wealthy, and he is from Jerusalem, the capital. Mary, on the other hand, is young (probably a teenager), female, of lowly status and power, and from up-country Galilee. Their circumstances could not be much different. Yet both are devoted to the

God of Israel and to God's covenant people. Both are called upon to give particular service, and both do so out of the devotion that defines their lives.

However, Luke tells us that Mary has found favour with God in a very special way. Note: He does not say that Mary gained favour, or earned favour; but that she 'found favour.' Using the language of Paul, we might say she was the recipient of divine grace in a very special way. Her devotion did not earn her this role; rather, it gave her the graciousness to respond openly – even though it would be hard to explain to others, and would ultimately be most painful.

One of the features of the icon I referred to earlier, *The Virgin of Vladimir*, is that Mary is depicted holding her infant child, supported him by one hand. Her other hand gently gestures in a way that draws the viewer's attention to the one she hold. A close look reveals a child with the head of a much older person resting upon the mother's cheek. And Mary's eyes are looking into the distance, as if to the future. There is both the sense of joy and impending pain, both of which were to be features of Mary's deep devotion.

This feature is present in another of Luke's stories about Mary and her son. Old Simeon, in the Temple at the time of Jesus' dedication, also sings a prayer-song (one of our canticles). He blesses the holy family, then says to Mary, "*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword shall pierce your own soul too*" (Luke 2:34 – 35). It takes devotion to bear this vocation.

But, devoted she was. And Mary, together with her husband Joseph initially, provided the devoted care of a parent for Jesus – and this did not stop with his childhood. It continued throughout his public ministry and, John the evangelist tells us, to the foot of the cross – and beyond !

Doxology

Let us back up a little – to the infant narrative in Luke. The first of three prayer-songs (canticles) is from Mary – the *Magnificat*. 'Magnify the Lord' is the Latin that gives this canticle its name. The version that we sing is based on the New English Bible translation, '*Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord*' (TiS 161). This expresses Mary's overwhelming joy in the news of her God-given vocation. It has both a personal and communal expression. It celebrates the promises and hopes of her faith in God's covenant purposes – and the overturning of the social order of the time. It is deeply personal, it is also

radically subversive in an occupied country of the Roman Empire. It is full of hope, and it embraces pain.

Fred Craddock wrote: “The *Magnificat* is a beautiful hymn, but it is a beautiful hymn to the God of Israel whose partisanship for the poor is patent throughout the Hebrew Bible. In his adult ministry, and especially in his Beatitudes, Mary’s Son will take up and enact this vision of God. We cannot pray (or sing) Mary’s *Magnificat* without embracing the same liberating mission in our own time and place.”

Doxology is an important part of Christian living. **Doxology** is taking time to give praise to God. In our Sunday liturgy, Praise and Adoration are at the very beginning of what we do when we gather for worship. And in our personal prayer life, we do well to begin with Praise and Thanksgiving.

Back in the 1970s (it may have been the 1980s) I was given a book titled, **Prison to Praise**, written by Merlin Carothers – a former US army chaplain. I can’t find the book now; but I do remember that its main focus was on the blessing to be found praising God in all circumstances. This notion has played a major role in my personal life as a Christian, and in my vocation as a minister.

Some of you will know that I live with bi-lateral facial palsy. This is sometimes called ‘tight face’ by therapists. It means that when I speak, sing or eat my face muscles begins to get tighter; and my eyes are affected so I can’t easily read a script. Now, I’m not telling you this so you feel sorry for me. Rather, I want to share with you a joy. On Sundays I sometimes have to resist singing in order to reserve my face muscles for speaking. I’ve found a useful aid. Many of best hymns have at least one verse that is doxological. That’s a sophisticated way of saying that they have a particular verse, often the final verse, which is essentially a doxology. I have a whole list of hymns with such verses. In recent times I have often sung only the doxology verses of hymns – and it’s powerfully uplifting.

To give you an example, the first hymn we sang together this morning, *The Advent of our God...*, concluded with a doxology (which I sang):

*Praise to the incarnate Son
who came to set us free,
with Father, Spirit, ever one
to all eternity incarnate Son. (TiS 271 verse 6)*

I find such meaning and joy in concentrating on singing the doxologies, that I can now cope with the disappointment of not being able to sing right through the hymns I've grown to love. This has also led me to choose the hymn I hope might be sung at my funeral. You may not be surprised to be told it is by Charles Wesley – *Love divine, all loves excelling*. The hymn concludes:

*Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be,
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory...
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.*

Discipleship

The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel tell us how Mary played her role as a devoted mother – to a child, then into adulthood. Luke also gives us some hints that Mary and her other children also maintained an active interest in Jesus and his unfolding ministry – sometimes with trepidation.

Luke gives us two accounts, in the middle of the Gospel, relating to Mary. The first is in Luke 8:19 – 21 (also in Matthew 12 & Mark 3): *“Then his mother and brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, ‘Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.’ But he said to them, ‘My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.’”*

And then in Luke 11:27 – 28 (in Luke only). Following Jesus' teaching about prayer and healing, we read: *“While he was speaking a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breast that nursed you!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it’.*

Now, read on their own, these passages appear as though Jesus was dismissive of his mother, and of his brothers. However, let us understand these words as they are qualified by another passage from the evangelist, Luke:

At the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles we are told that the risen-crucified Jesus tells his followers to stay in Jerusalem and await the promised Spirit. Acts

first section tells of the election of a replacement of Judas, and then lists the Apostles who gathered in the upstairs room. It then continues (Acts 1:14):

All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers

This helps us to understand the earlier passages that appeared to be dismissive of Mary and her other sons. Jesus had been insisting that true discipleship is not built upon family relations, on who you know and where you have come from. Rather, true discipleship is built upon devotion and obedience – those who listen for the word of God and allow what they hear to define their lives and determine their actions.

And surely this is the story of Mary the mother of Jesus.

Close

In my preparation this Sunday I accessed an internet site at Dayton University, Ohio, in the USA. They have a special course in the study of Mary. I conclude by quoting from part of the material I accessed (with some minor alterations):

Luke's Gospel (and Acts) is a Christ-centered proclamation to Christian believers of all times. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is primarily a believer who has been with Jesus from his conception, to his birth, his infancy, childhood, and manhood. She continues as a believer after his death and resurrection and is present when Jesus' promise of his Spirit is realized at Pentecost. There is no one person who ever had such a close relationship with Jesus in all stages of his life, and she is an acknowledged founder of his Church.

Mary the Mother of Jesus is surely a true model of Christian discipleship. With Mary then, let us all be glad to, ***Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord... to children's children and forevermore!*** (the 1st and last line of TiS 161).

We Respond to God's Word:

THE CHOIR SINGS – *Jesus Christ is here.* Words by Geoffrey Marshall-Taylor

There is singing in the desert, there is laughter in the skies,
There are wise men filled with wonder, there are shepherds with surprise,
You can tell the world is dancing by the light that's in their eyes,
For Jesus Christ is here.

*Come and sing aloud your praises,
Come and sing aloud your praises,*

*Come and sing aloud your praises,
For Jesus Christ is here.*

He hears deaf men by the lakeside, he sees blind men in the streets,
He goes up to those who cannot walk, he talks to all he meets,
Touching silken robes or tattered clothes, it's everyone he greets,
For Jesus Christ is here.

There is darkness on the hillside, there is sorrow in the town,
There's a man upon a wooden cross, a man who's gazing down,
You can see the marks of love and not the furrows of a frown,
For Jesus Christ is here.

There is singing in the desert, there is laughter in the skies,
There are wise men filled with wonder, there are shepherds with surprise,
You can tell the world is dancing by the light that's in their eyes,
For Jesus Christ is here.

THE OFFERING, PRAYER and our 'JOURNEY SONG'

Prayer:

Loving God - we continually seek your strength and comfort. You often free us
from our unfounded
fears, and provide us with wonderful examples of your love. In response, we
offer these gifts, along
with ourselves. We pray that each will help provide something, that touches
people with your
extraordinary love. This we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen

SING – TIS 342 (verse 4)
Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small:
love so amazing, so divine
demands my soul, my life, my all.

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE and THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
Now and for ever.**

THE CHILDREN 'SHOW & TELL'

The Sending Forth of The People Of God

WORDS OF MISSION, BLESSING AND DISMISSAL

WE SING Hark! *the herald angels sing...* TiS 303

1

Hark! the herald angels sing
glory to the new-born King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful, all you nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with the angelic host proclaim,
'Christ is born in Bethlehem'.

*Hark the herald angels sing
glory to the new-born King.*

2

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin's womb:
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail the incarnate Deity,
pleased in human flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.

3

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings:
mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more need die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.

COPYRIGHT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Words and music used in this Service are used in accordance with one or more of several licences St Margaret's Uniting Church holds for use in public Worship,

INCLUDING LicenSing # 604624 -

Copyright cleared music for churches CAL Copyright Licence # 3257 (Copyright Agency Limited)

CCLI - Church Copyright Licence #158456

CCLI Photocopy Licence - #158463 (Christian Copyright Licencing Asia – Pacific)

APRA (Australian Performing Rights Association) [No Number]

Public performance and/or communication of copyright music.

THE LORD'S PRAYER English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC)

New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.