

Advent 4A Matthew 1:18-25 18/12/22

When you look out at the world you live in, what do you see? At first, many of us tend to see things that are disturbing and threatening. That may not be all there is out there, but those are the things we tend to see first. The newspapers are full of terrible news. There are reports of oppression and violence in other countries and of international tensions that threaten our own sense of security. We hear about terrorism and the threat of terrorism. Senseless shootings and violence.

We read reports of economic instability that make us anxious about keeping the level of prosperity that we have. We hear of corruption and abuses of power in business and government that make us lose confidence in some of the structures of community we need to be able to trust. Around us we see evidence of erosion of moral standards that seem to threaten our value systems.

Some of us can look closer to home and see other things that are disturbing to us, conflicts between family members, anxieties about our children or our parents, anxieties about whether we can stay employed or make ends meet with our income. Some of us even look within ourselves and see things that make us feel not okay. Knowing that we have to live in that world can cause lots of anxieties.

Lots of people must have had similar feelings in first century Palestine. There were tensions between the religious and ethnic groups within the Jewish nation. The poor were very poor and struggled to survive, and the whole country lived under the oppression of the anxious tyrant Herod who was so cruel that he had several members of his own family killed because he imagined they were threats to his power.

In addition to these things, a certain young carpenter named Joseph had some other things to worry about. He was engaged to a young woman named Mary. He was looking forward to all of the things that young engaged people look forward to. But he just learned that his fiancée was pregnant and he knew he was not the father. He knew that Jewish law allowed him to have her stoned to death but he didn't want to do that. He didn't know what he should do. He was ready to terminate the engagement quietly and try as best he could to put his life together again.

Then Joseph had a dream. An angel came to him and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because her pregnancy was an act of God. She was chosen to be the mother of the long-expected Messiah. And Joseph would have an important role to play in the working out of the purpose of God. The angel spoke of two names by which the child might be called. He would be the fulfilment of a prophecy of Isaiah of a Messiah who would be called "Emmanuel," which means "God with us" or "God is with us." But the angel told Joseph that he was to name the child 'Jesus,' which means 'God's salvation.'

When Joseph woke up, he must have thought a lot about the dream. Finally he decided to take it seriously. He believed God was about to do his work in the world and that he would have a role to play in it. He had no idea what would be required of him, but he was willing to do whatever was necessary to participate in the saving work of God.

After the dream, life must have looked very different to Joseph. He saw his own situation in a different light. He was no longer a betrayed betrothed. He was a man chosen to do something special and demanding in the service of God. And the world looked different to him too. King Herod was still a force to be reckoned with. But now he knew that someone greater than Herod was at work in the world. God was active with the people. All of the problems of God's people were made subject to a new possibility that was breaking in upon the world, because someone was coming who would be God's salvation.

What can it mean to know that God is with us in this world and in this life? We are far too accustomed to thinking that God is far away “somewhere beyond the sky” and that God is absent when some of the important things of our lives are happening. What would it mean to be able to believe we live in a God-invaded world, a world in which God is present with us? What could it mean to believe that God is at work in our world doing things that will move us and our world toward salvation?

We started by talking about how this world we live in usually looks to us. If we believe those things Jesus has taught us to believe about God, we need to take another look. Things will look different. Things will look different.

It would be a mistake for us to believe that everything happening in our world is something God decided to cause to happen. No, God has chosen to put things together in this world so that there is an openness- the dynamics of creation and human free will -so that all sorts of things are possible, both good things and bad things. Many of the threatening things we spoke about when we were talking about how life looks to us are real destructive forces that have to be dealt with, just as King Herod was a real threat Joseph and Mary had to deal with. But God is at work in our world too. God is at work in all of those people and forces that tend to positively pull things together and make things work and move toward the fulfilment of their best possibilities. The Scriptures teaches us that those forces through which God is working will ultimately win the future. When we look at life in our world, it is natural for us to see first the threatening things. But we need and have to look again and see the promising things happening in the world and recognise that God is at work in them.

When we are overwhelmed with the problems of our lives, it is natural to see only the problems, to find the faults. It's a major failing in Churches and can be the death of them. The challenges and problems seem so big that they blot out the sky. But in those times Jesus is calling us to have to look again and see the things happening in our world, in our Church and in our lives that represent the saving work of God. It is important for us to study the biblical message so that we can understand what the shape of God's salvation is and be able to recognise the kinds of things that God does to save. It is much too easy for us to dream up our own ideas about what the solution to our problems, the Church's problems and the world's problems should be and then to try to enlist God to accomplish our plans. It is important to remember how Jesus worked to save and then to watch for those happenings in our lives and in our world. When we see those things happening, we can take hope. We can open ourselves to them. We can commit ourselves to them. And like Joseph and Mary, we can become participants in God's work.

As we read the gospel of Matthew, we are going to see how Jesus came to bring an entirely new possibility to the world, a possibility called the kingdom of heaven. This is not just a little adornment to be added to the edge of our lives or a reward to be tacked on to the ends of our lives. It is a total reorganisation of life around a new centre. It is a reorganisation of life in the world so that there will be new values, new ways of seeing things, new ways of doing things, and new things to be doing.

Jesus comes to us as individuals and offers us a new possibility that will reorganise our lives. This reorganisation will indeed make a difference. Some of the things that seem threatening to us may have their roots in conditions in our own lives that need to be changed. Our own unhappiness or unresolved grief can infect all our views and understandings. However being open to new possibilities will give us reasons to look again at some of the things that are going on in our own lives. And then they will look different. They will look different.

There is a story in the second book of Kings in the Old Testament that is very interesting (2 Kings 6:8-23). The prophet Elisha provoked the anger of the king of Aram by repeatedly warning the king

of Israel how to avoid the attacks of the Arameans. When the king of Aram learned it was the prophet that was his undoing and that the prophet was staying at Dothan, he sent an army to surround the city by night so they could capture Elisha in the morning. One of the servants of Elisha got up early and went out and saw that the city was surrounded. He came back and told the prophet. Elisha replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them" (v. 16). Elisha prayed for his servant and his eyes were opened and he saw that there were horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. Then Elisha performed a miracle that prevented a war and caused the Arameans to stop coming against Israel. When we are on the Lord's side, there are always more with us than there are against us.

When we look at life and find it full of hurtful and threatening things, let's remember that God is in this world and God is at work to save. And for our and God's sake then let us look again. Look again..... Fr Robert Newton