

## Year C Advent 4 Gospel Lk 1.39-45 HTK 2021

At this time of the year High Street is festooned with cardboard cut-outs, fake wreaths, candy sticks, plastic Christmas trees and the like. In a similar vein in the lead up to Easter and Halloween the Boroondara Council has given its residents decorations that leave no one to doubt there's a festival coming.

I wonder if somewhere in the Council's large storage areas there's a shed full of appropriate cut outs, Easter Bunnies, eggs, pumpkins, witches and warlocks and Christmas decorations, all neatly stacked and sorted ready for the succeeding years.

Among the decorations this year is this, a sort of flower head with four words which the designer has decided are descriptive of Christmas. No doubt many of you have seen them. I wonder if you can recall them. Well, here they are, love peace hope and joy and underneath just the word Christmas, and under that again, of course Boroondara City of Harmony.

Last week the Vicar preached on joy, this week I want to focus on the third word in the group namely hope. For whereas love, peace and joy are things that all of us would wish for each other, hope is a little bit different. If only because it's not clear, especially in the poster, what sort of hope intended. Hope for what? Love, peace, joy are fairly self-explanatory but hope remains somewhat enigmatic.

Advent calls to us in the midst of the weight on our shoulders, and it speaks of hope. As we watch the news and see the pain in the world, we are faced with our own powerlessness. As snow and ice and cold weigh down the landscape of many northern climes, we too feel

weighed down: by our ever-extending holiday to-do lists, by the suffering in the world, and by our own personal struggles.

Advent is here to remind us that we cannot save ourselves, but that there is yet hope. Today, with four candles lit, the Song of Mary soars through the Gospel reading and into our hearts again, as it does every year.

Mary, the unwed mother, the fiancé of a poor carpenter. Mary, who knows depths of desperation that many of us will never have to know. Mary, who felt herself powerless but sang to God who was about to save the whole world.

We often think of Mary as gentle and meek, but today, Mary is brave and bold, singing loud and strong. Everything — the very shape of human history — is about to change. The new dawn is on the way, and Mary sings out to greet it. The weight lessens; hope is born.

Hope I suggest is much more than mere optimism. A lot of hope can shake the foundations of everything that weighs us down. A lot of hope can change the course of history.

For Mary's part, she doesn't initially greet the news of her pregnancy with her soaring song and blazing hope. When Luke's Gospel first introduces us to Mary, she is more like the traditional image of Mary — young, meek, seemingly timid, but ultimately faithful. When the angel tells her the news, she consents, but she's not singing yet.

As she's absorbing the news from the angel Gabriel that she will conceive and bear a child, he tells her, perhaps to console her: Elizabeth, your relative, is pregnant too, even in her old age!

Gabriel doesn't actually tell Mary to go to Elizabeth, but Luke says she still "made haste" to go to the Judean town in the hill country to see her. Mary wants to be near someone who understands. Elizabeth is also pregnant by a miracle. Elizabeth, Mary knows, won't think she's crazy. And here, with another human being who understands that God works in really weird and unexpected and direct ways, Mary is able to find the courage to sing her song of hope. Not ordinary optimism, but great hope. The kind that catches fire. The kind that sings loud.

Today, Mary sings as she invites us into the vulnerable territory of daring to hope big. Optimism looks behind us to find comfort in what we've experienced before. Hope — the big, world-shaking, musical hope of Mary — looks ahead, knowing that we cannot imagine what God is able to do.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with optimism. Optimism hopes for good fortune, for fun with friends and family during the holidays, for a blessed and happy new year, and for love and warmth to surround us. There is nothing wrong with a little optimistic Advent cheer.

But if you have experienced the depths of despair, if you have seen the pain that exists in the world, you know that optimism is not enough on its own. It is too difficult to sustain. The world is too

broken, too violent, and too divided, and we alone cannot fix it. Our one spark of hope is that God has spoken and told us that someday, all things — all things — from our personal struggles to the weight of the world's pain, shall be made right. That hope is why Mary sings.

Our song is one of extraordinary hope. Hope that has seen the broken and divided state of the world and knows that it cannot afford to hope too small because we cannot repair the world on our own. Only God can, and only God will. In the meantime, we are called to make our corner of the world that God so loves a less divided, more trustworthy, more hopeful place. We are called to sing.

The best part about Mary's song of hope is that it is never hope unfulfilled. Every year, we remember her bold song to remind ourselves that God has already broken through. Even in the darkness, even in the deepest disappointments, even when we are betrayed, and even when the world looks most broken, we keep this crazy hope alive that God has, and God will break through. And today, we make haste to find each other to sing that hope again, to fan that spark into flame again.

Every year, Christmas always arrives. Even if we are exhausted or broken-hearted, the Light of Christ always comes to the Church as it does to the world. Always. The final candle is always lit. Our challenge is to take that light and shine it in the dark places so that hope can be restored and made real.



