

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL EUCHARIST
4th SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2011

Festivals of the blessed Virgin Mary – and the last Sunday in Advent – remind me of a dear friend who, at least in a physical sense, is no longer with us. Arthur Dooley was a well-known sculptor, whose work was much admired by the Queen Mother among many others. He was also a tough Liverpoolian ex-docker, given to forthright opinions on many subjects, including religion.

In a talk to our congregation at Liverpool Parish Church, Arthur said he grew up thinking the Incarnation was a can of milk; that Mary Magdalene couldn't have been a tart – his word - because the Bible didn't say she was (which, by the way, is true;) and, perhaps most startling, that the Virgin Mary was the first Protestant.

Questioned on this point, Arthur justified his opinion in this way. 'She was doing the dishes when an angel flew in through the window and told her she was going to have a baby and the Holy Ghost was the father. What did she do? She protested, of course: that's what being a Protestant means, and that's why she was the first of them. Of course, she came round in the end. Well, you would, wouldn't you? You don't mess with the Holy Ghost?'

Dear Arthur! His last commission, of which I am very proud, was a sculpture of Our Lady of the Quay in Liverpool Parish Church, the Sailors' Church. A burnished bronze image of Mary stands on the prow of a boat in the Maritime Chapel, managing to be both strong and tender at the same time. She is, as Michelin would say, well worth a detour.

Incidentally, on the day when the sculpture was unveiled by Princess Alexandra, she said, 'Mr Dooley, I think she's lovely!' To which Arthur, giving her a playful pat on the shoulder, replied: 'Good on you, love, just like you!'

Well, today, the Church invites us to think about Mary, and if Arthur Dooley has helped to put flesh and blood on the mother of Jesus, to turn us away from gilded shrines and pale, submissive, frozen images of Our Lady, so much the better.

The truth is, of course, Mary's protests went a lot further than her hesitation when confronted by God's unexpected messenger. She said 'No' more than once, as when she visited her cousin Elizabeth and – so Luke tells us – uttered what we know as the Magnificat. In that bold proclamation, sanctified for us perhaps by

familiarity and its matchless placing at the heart of Evensong, Mary said 'No' to the mighty on their thrones; 'No' to the well-fed; 'No' to the oppressors who exploit the poor and hungry. So, to coin a phrase: 'No, No, No!'

Beneath the trappings which have gathered around the story of Christ's Nativity – inevitably and with the best intentions – we discover a girl - a very young girl - faced, like her cousin Elizabeth, with an unplanned pregnancy; forced by the occupying power to make a long, hazardous journey to fulfil a bureaucratic requirement, and with it, the prophecies about God's Messiah; and all that followed, beginning with a period of exile with her partner and new baby, as a refugee in another country.

The Hebrew text of Isaiah's prophecy of the birth speaks of a young woman who would conceive and bear a son. The King James Bible follows the later Greek rendering of the text and declares that she was a virgin. The Hebrew has 'young woman' or 'girl'. This has always presented problems for many thoughtful believers, and that is certainly true of members of this congregation, as they have been brave enough to admit.

For them – and, as we learned this week, for our Prime Minister – the Christian ethic – the teaching – is the heart of the Gospel and that is enough to compel belief.

Horace Dammers, a former Dean of Bristol, wrote an extended meditation on Handel's Messiah. It is a very thoughtful and thought-provoking document, and it is sad that it was only published privately after his death. Commenting on the passage '*Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel – God with us*'. Horace discussed the Hebrew and Greek text, and then continued:

'Since the Enlightenment, a great number of people – including, I suspect many churchgoers – just cannot accept (the) possibility of the Virgin Birth. Their scepticism can be reinforced on theological grounds. Of course God can do anything, but only what is agreeable to his nature as faithful and reliable. Would the creator of the laws of nature flout them in this particular instance?

'It has been suggested that there were rumours that Jesus was not the son of his alleged parents. If so, then the Christians were under great pressure to provide an honourable explanation.

‘So was she a virgin? Many of those who believe that she was would prefer the question not to have been asked. But it is too important a question for that, involving the faith or lack of it of many. It has been said (and recently from this pulpit, by the way) that the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. If you do not believe Mary was a virgin, *do not be too sure*. God can do anything that is in accordance with his nature of love, (so) honestly apply your reason to this important question.

‘And if you do believe it, then honestly apply your reason. And (above all) do not unchurch those who cannot agree with you. All can agree (after all) that the Virgin Birth is the centerpiece of that most beautiful and influential story, the Christmas story.’

Those words – brave as they are – seem to me entirely sensible, and they enable us to move away from such speculations – which go back to the very beginning of Christianity – and to focus on the centrality of Jesus and his birth, for which we have been preparing during Advent: the oh-so-short sequence of his earthly life from cradle to cross; from tomb to the Mount of Ascension; to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the birth of the Christian Church.

It is a story, not only about the birth of the Saviour, but about the birth of a new way of living which Jesus called the Kingdom of God: a way of living whereby feet are washed, people forgive each other, not once or twice but 70 x 7 times, and all are valued for just who they are. That is the essence of the Kingdom, and it follows, as certainly as night follows day, from the song of young Mary, which speaks so powerfully to our condition now, just as it did to those who first heard it in first century occupied Palestine.

How I wish that the world so radically envisioned by Mary in the Magnificat could fill our hearts this Christmas, with both the promise, and the need, for this word of transformation and liberation.

For, like Mary, our calling, if we call ourselves Christian, is to hear the word of God, to believe it and then to act on that belief. Thus it was that Mary willingly played an active role in God’s plan for salvation as the mother of the Saviour, making possible new life for all through Jesus Christ. After all, as Arthur Dooley said, ‘you don’t mess with the Holy Ghost....’

Be that as it may, as Luke has the angel saying, 'Nothing will be impossible with God.' Mary had never sought motherhood; she had many good reasons to protest; but she accepted her mission with all its mystery and complexity, and she went off into uncharted territory, armed with nothing more than faith and obedience: but those have always been sufficient.

'Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word.' Amen.
