**Advent 4 2016
Chichester Cathedral**

Most of my family are Church of Ireland, and years ago there was often deep suspicion amongst them of anything Catholic and this, of course, included the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Thankfully, in recent years and in many parts of the Church, the Blessed Virgin Mary has become much more of a focus for unity than division. Back in 1981 the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission was able to state *“We agree that there can be but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, and (we) reject any interpretation of the role of Mary which obscures this affirmation”.* I believe that a number of misunderstandings between our churches would be swept away if such ecumenical statements were more widely read and studied.

In a later document from the same commission, there is the stark comment:*“…it is impossible to be faithful to Scripture and not take Mary seriously”.*

We have been reminded of this in our Gospel reading this morning: the story of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, which is followed by Mary’s song: *The Magnificat*, in which Mary she speaks for the poor and oppressed who long for God’s reign of justice to be established.

This is a very different Mary from the one depicted on many Christmas cards. Don’t get me wrong, I do love those “Madonnas of the High Renaissance”: Keep them coming…! But Western art has often shown us a less feisty and less single-minded young girl that we find in scripture. For example, from our Gospel this morning - although it surely strains credulity – we are told that this young, Jewish teenage girl made the journey to *“a Judean town in the hill country”* presumably… on her own -!

Single minded and spontaneous Mary might be, but Luke’s intention behind this story of her visit to Elizabeth is primarily *theological.*He brings together the two mothers-to-be because the birth of Jesus will usher in the final stage of salvation history. So, Luke wants his readers to see them *together*, praising God *together:* ***–*** *together* being part of this great moment in history.

And why? Because he can then present Elizabeth’s child (who was to be John the Baptist) as the *forerunner*. We are told that her unborn child *“leapt in her womb”:* a literary device, to show John recognising the Messiah, who he would announce to Israel. Here, even in the womb, he already anticipates their future relationship.

What, then, can we, take from this story today? For me there are two principle issues here. The first is that this it is primarily a story about praise, gratitude and thanksgiving. Luke’s original readers were being encouraged to *hope for and expect* the salvation of Israel. Now, living in God’s post-resurrection world, we are again reminded, with Christmas just around the corner, that we are to be people of expectation and hope: expectation that in Christ God will indeed*“make all things new”* and out of all the disappointments or indeed tragedies in life, there can be resurrection and renewal. That can be hard for people who are bowed down with very real burdens, and we need to get alongside them and in what I call a “platitude-free” way, offer compassion and that hope.

And how God must long for us to keep the flame of hope and peace alive at this time!

Just days before we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace at Christmas, I read in the newspaper that the United States government has plans is to ramp up its military capability in space. “Spaceforce” will be an entirely new department of the military: no doubt costing billions of dollars!

With such news as this, the appalling situation at Gatwick airport, our own country in turmoil over Brexit, the plight of people in the Yemen and so much suffering elsewhere, I do believe we are being called this flame alive in our places of work, in our homes and in our hearts, where all true peace begins. I am quite sure that people flock to church at Christmas because the worship goes some way towards meeting a real hunger and need to feel that hope, joy and peace of Christ in a world where it is so often lacking.

Of course, it is all too easy to moan about it all. I was trying to buy Christmas cards recently. You will be glad to hear that I ended up pouring money into the Cathedral shop. But I also looked around other local shops and in one, the proprietor said to me *“It is getting more and more difficult to find religious Christmas cards”*and this was indeed evident from his stock. But I found myself thinking: well I could have a good old moan about it, and about the commercialism of Christmas etc. but why not instead, ask myself if there is anything, in my tiny way, that I could, just possibly,*do about it?*

At Christmas God became human in Jesus Christ and – as I said - inaugurated the final part of salvation history: a fact so mind-blowing that it surely merits deep reflection and thanksgiving at this time and surely challenges us to find ways of sharing it with others. Particularly when we are tired, we can find anything to moan about but, the visit of Mary to Elizabeth calls us back to thanksgiving and gratitude to God for all he has done for us.

And, my goodness, attending services here, listening to our wonderful choir and organists, meeting so many of you, now as Cathedral Chaplain, and being Custos of St Mary’s Hospital, I have got so much to thanks God for that I can hardly get my brain around how fortunate I am.

Secondly, finally and briefly, the other principle issue that we can take from the story of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth come from the mouth of Elizabeth herself:*“Blessed is she who believed”.*Mary is blest because she took a huge step of faith at the annunciation.

And if we are to be effective in sharing God’s love, then Mary can be our role model. In response to God’s call, she was at first disorientated, fearful and confused, but then this turned into an active readiness to do God’s will. Real discipleship is like that: moments of confusion and insecurity as well as the eventual confidence to follow what we think God wants us to do and then take the plunge. If we say *“Yes”*to God, even when we are most fearful, we can achieve far more than we thought possible, as did Mary, and show the world what the birth of Christ is all about.