

Advent 4 Year B 2020

(Finished preparing this on Friday evening - before the PM's Saturday Press Conference and the lurid 'Christmas is Cancelled' headlines in today's papers.)

I have to tell you that I get very cross - and anger isn't something that I do very often (such a waste of emotional energy!) - but I do get very cross when I hear on the television news or read in the paper, about the possibility of Christmas being cancelled because of the pandemic - immediately followed by a denial. The Shadow Health Secretary said on Thursday that Christmas would not be cancelled in spite of Tier 3 restrictions in England, because Santa would still come - and the Italian Government has said that Father Christmas will be exempt from travel restrictions. It is as if the only things which constitute Christmas are Santa, family gatherings and excess. Whatever happened to Christmas - the Christ Mass, the Eucharistic celebration of the birth of our Lord? Christmas can never be cancelled because it is the celebration, the remembrance, of an

historic event, the birth of Jesus - it for ever reminds us of what God has done for us in Jesus. How can what Santa brings ever be compared with the God-given gifts of hope, trust, joy and love? In a world currently overwhelmed by fear and pain, it is not the presents we can touch that matter most, but God's eternal gifts, which is why we hear Paul urging the Christians in Rome to give glory to God - 'to the only wise God be glory for ever'. We give glory to God not through an insatiable desire to earn God's favour (like giving an extravagant gift to someone you want to impress or get closer to), we do it because of our gratitude for God's grace, God's redemption, and God's love., even though we know we don't always deserve these things.

Think of Mary - that young Jewish girl of no social standing, probably no education, nor of any wealth. Did she deserve to be the mother of Our Lord? Had she earned sufficient brownie points to win the competition, to come first in the game - Who's God's favourite?

King David clearly thought he was a game winner - he had defeated all his enemies, united Judea and Israel as one kingdom, taken the city of Jerusalem and established his court there - making it the City of David - and now, he had decided that he

would build a house for God, the temple, and then God would reside in it. It's all a little arrogant, isn't it? David had decided where God would live - and in spite of the initial reaction of the prophet Nathan, David gets his knuckles rapped. 'Don't tell me what to do, boy. You won't build me a house, I will make you a house, not of cedar but of human flesh, a dynasty, established forever' But it only lasted about four hundred years - however, the hope, the belief, that one day a descendant of David would return and replicate David's military and political success never left the people. They call this descendant the Messiah. When he came, of course, they (that is, the people in charge) didn't like what they saw and liked even less his prophetic teaching, his care for the marginalised, his non-violent opposition to military uprising - could this man be a Son of David?

Nathan quoted God as saying that he is comfortable living in a tent with a nomadic people. St John, in the Prologue to his Gospel, tells us that the Word became flesh and pitched his tent amongst us, and the tent he lived in, this human dwelling place for the Son of God, was Mary.

The glorious stone and timber Temple which David's son Solomon built could not contain God. The appropriate way for the living,

loving God to dwell in the midst of his people was as a human being, reflecting God's image. Mary became the temporary dwelling place of the Most High; God had found himself a house, the womb of Mary. Why Mary? What did she do to deserve that? I would like to suggest that she didn't do anything - it is God who does the doing. It is all gift, all grace - God offers her the gift - she can accept or reject. Gifts and favours reflect the generosity of the giver, not the worthiness of the receiver. When Mary is chosen to be the mother of God's Son, God's choice of her is not reward for dedicated work or an answer to prayer - could you ever imagine that she would have prayed to give birth to God's Son? When God chooses her, that choice makes her worthy, that choice fills her with grace, and that is why we call her blessed. That blessedness does not exclude her from the human race, does not deny her the right to say yes or no. She chose to say yes without attaching any conditions. And that is what sets her apart - because when we say yes, we nearly always attach conditions - 'yes, but only if'; 'yes, but'; 'well, okay - however'.

But surely we are here today because we know, to a greater or lesser extent, we know that God has chosen us, chosen us to be

followers of his Son, to live according to his teaching, He has a role for each of us. We are free to chooses, to choose to put ourselves in his service, or not. Can we, each one of us, say with Mary 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'?