

**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> December 2017**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: II Samuel 7.1-11, 16**

**NT: Romans 16.25-27**

**G: Luke 1.26-38**

Over the Christmas season churches across the world see a pleasing increase in attendance. If only, we might say, it were like that every Sunday. And yet a few years ago a survey commissioned by a prominent London church revealed that 70% of the British public do not believe in the Bible's account of the Christmas story. There is a fair chance, I should say, that most of that 70% will nevertheless be celebrating Christmas, and I imagine that quite a number of them have or will be attending a church service at some point this Christmas. Part of me, though, wants to register surprise that a full 30% *do* believe in the Christmas story, as recounted in the Bible. Or rather, I wonder what they do believe. I am sure that many of you have read articles or heard sermons about the inconsistencies between the different Gospel authors, and the historical inaccuracies. So which story does the 30% minority actually believe? Is it Matthew's story, or Luke's? Well, we are not to know.

Today's Gospel is taken from Luke's account of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. We heard about the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and announcing that she will give birth. The Christmas story would not be complete without it. Is this the bit which 70% of the British public does not believe? Possibly. Or is this such an accepted part of the story that it passes without comment.

Some aspects of the Christmas story are quite challenging, and so perhaps it is right to think a bit about what we mean by 'belief'. We all talk about our beliefs quite a lot: you may not think you do, but every Sunday in the Creed we use the phrase "We believe" four times. So, let's think about what belief is. First of all, it is a positive statement. Once you are reciting the creed you are assenting to a given statement. You are saying what you believe, not what you don't believe. To assent your belief in the statements of the creed is to accept a starting point. You are not moving towards a point where you

believe what is in the creed, but rather you are starting from these beliefs. The statements of belief recited in the Creed therefore become a springboard rather than a goal. If your faith is to grow and develop then it is from the point of uttering the creed. The only problem is that in the modern age it is rather unfashionable to use words like “We believe” because they seem to uncritical and so accepting, whereas today we are taught to question everything.

So when we say “We believe” we are probably really saying “We believe, but only to the extent that it suits us, because actually I have rather a lot of unanswered questions”. But that would be a bit of a mouthful to say every Sunday, and it would also be rather negative. We all have little areas of Christianity which we are slightly unclear about, but we all happily join in saying “I believe”. But saying “We believe” is broader than this: it is actually to participate in the history of Christianity and to signal membership of a club. The word ‘believe’ therefore moves from being personal acceptance of certain dogmas to being a statement of belonging. You might say that this is watering down the creed, but the bottom line is that you cannot join the church without saying “I believe...” So ‘believe’ is a word which belongs to the church.

Suddenly we have moved on from crude surveys which categorize people and mark out in black and white those who are believers and those who are not. We find that belief has as much to do with belonging as it has to do with details. And I wonder whether we should look for a new word instead of ‘believe’. What about ‘trust’. The details of the creeds and the more challenging bits of the Bible are always going to be controversial, but perhaps what we are really saying by our church membership is not that we all believe exactly the same things, but rather that we all trust in the same things. “We trust in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We trust in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God.” That seems to me what we are saying together. Whatever really happened in the Christmas story, and whether you are part of the 70% who don’t believe the biblical account or the 30% who do, we are bound together not by the details, but by our trust in God. We know that he exists and we know that he loves us, and we know that he is calling us

into relationship with him. We *trust* in God.

So let's look back at our Gospel reading today. The story about Mary (and I don't need to know whether you are part of the 70% or the 30%!) is a miraculous one. The angel appeared to Mary and said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." This was an amazing thing to say to a young girl, and she was, of course, rather startled and full of questions. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" But the angel explained, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." So that answered her question? Or did it? Does it answer all your questions about the virgin birth? Actually, if you read it carefully you will note that it does not really say much at all. All the bit about the Holy Spirit's involvement in her pregnancy does not correspond to what we know about human biology, and actually the way it is written does not necessarily preclude the more traditional way of conceiving children. If I had been Mary, I think I would have been left with even more questions after the angel's answer than if I had just left it at the bit about giving birth to Jesus. So what did Mary do? What follow-up questions did she ask? Mary simply said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." No more questions and no fuss about the details. Just "Here am I, the servant of the Lord". Mary just trusted in God.

And that is one of the great things about the Christmas story which apparently 70% of people do not believe. The person at the very heart of the story, the person who had most to lose in the story by being an unmarried teenage mother in a most unprogressive society, the person who really might like to have known the details which 70% don't believe, *she* did not ask about the details, because they were not important to her. There is no way in which we can know which bits of the traditional Christmas story are true and which are not, but what we can acknowledge is that perhaps the details do not matter. Faith in God, and faith in Jesus Christ should not be based upon reconstructing unknowable details from 2000 years ago. Faith in God, and faith in Jesus Christ can only be based upon God's

revelation to us of his presence and his love for us. Mary, who is always the focus of this last Sunday before Christmas, is our model in the Christmas story. Mary is challenged by God in the story, and her response is simple. Mary opens her arms to God and says, 'I trust you'. She says, "Let it be with me according to your word."

Fr Crispin Pailing