

**Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021**  
**Advent 4 (C)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Micah 5.2-5a**  
**NT: Hebrews 10.5-10**  
**G: Luke 1.39-55**

I won't start by asking for a show of hands to see who is ready for Christmas. A little trip into a supermarket yesterday morning was a rather hectic experience, and in a crowded supermarket with a Christmas fever you could see the killer instinct in everyone, even when they are wearing masks. It is not that everyone was lunging for the last box of chocolates on the shelf, because the shops are well stocked and no one goes home without a full trolley. But rather that the excitement of the whole occasion is always too much for some every year, and the worst goes on show. Supermarket trolleys ceased to be just trolleys, and became weapons of mass destruction; I suspect even walking sticks were left casually hanging out in order to trip up the other customers. There is sense of frustration in the air as everyone tries to get from one end of an aisle to another.

So long as you are not involved in too many crashes near the tinned fruit, it can be quite amusing watching people shopping for Christmas. And in a country where the majority does not go to church it is interesting seeing how much people invest in Christmas, though of course there is the added complication this year of people stocking up for the possibility of a quick fortnight's lockdown. Going out and preparing for the birth of Jesus is a popular occupation. Now listen to this line from our Gospel: "At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth." Mary "got ready" and "hurried". It's all a bit like our preparations.

Over the next week, even in the embers of a pandemic, churches across the world will be welcoming strangers through the doors. Many people at our carol service this evening and

at every other carol service don't go near a church the rest of the time. This is something which some churchgoers find difficult to deal with. And you could say that this is a great opportunity for us to evangelise and spread the gospel, and that everyone at the carol service could potentially be back the following week. It's possible, I suppose, but we all know that the reality is that going to a carol service is a bit like eating a large Christmas Pudding: it seems the right thing to do at the time and it feeds our immediate hunger, but one is quite enough and we don't feel the need to eat one every week. Many of the Christmas services which people attend are all right on their own, and they don't leave people wanting more. It is good for every one of these seats to be full, as they often are at many services throughout the year, but I'm not sure it has much effect on church attendance on a Sunday by Sunday basis. In fact for many clergy church attendance around Christmas time is rather depressing because so many of the regular congregation go away. But like people in the supermarkets, and like Mary getting ready and hurrying off to see Elizabeth, Christmas is a time when people make an effort to do something. And what are they doing? Well, they are coming to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Church attendance is a bit like receiving Christmas cards. There are people we never see or have any contact with, but who send us a Christmas card once a year. But we don't rip the cards up and cry 'hypocrisy', but we read and value the card for being a thought and a moment of communication. So those who come to church at Christmas are welcome, and we are pleased to see them. We shall welcome them, and it is the warmth of our welcome which may attract them back later in the new year when the church is not competing with visiting relatives, overflowing fridges, and packed television schedules.

Mary, in our Gospel reading, is doing just what everyone else does before Christmas – she is getting on with a busy list of things to do. She is hurrying, we are told. And she is

meeting people. And if you read the Gospel stories of Jesus' birth, there is very little religion in it until you get to the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. And the centrepiece of the Gospel is Mary's song, the Magnificat. This is her response to the coming of Jesus. When we read it we see that this is not a list of things that Mary has done, even though it is her song, but a list of things that God has done: "He has performed mighty deeds"; "He has brought down rulers from their thrones"; He has filled the hungry with good things." And all of this begins to show to us what is really going on at Christmas, what is going on when our churches are suddenly full. Christmas is a time when God is doing something for us, and we receive and respond. Mary is, in fact, quite passive in the nativity story: "Let it be to me according to your word," she says. The events unfold without us having to do much, except to gather and to watch. You may feel that you are busy in the run-up to Christmas, and a trip to the supermarket has an air of busyness about it, but in fact we are all being swept along in a drama – not our drama, but God's drama. Our innate need to fill our houses with enough food for a month is not usually our own idea, but rather our response to the events. Mary did not plan the events, but she was swept along in someone else's drama.

You will get plenty of sermons about the importance of Christmas, and the significance of the incarnation in our lives, but today I want us to reflect on our response to events, and how we prepare for them. I want us as well to think about how those around us who are not usually in church are also responding to events, and how part of their response is to come along to church. Perhaps for many people at Christmas coming to church is like hearing a party next door – you may not know exactly what is going on, but you'd rather like to stick your head around the door just to be part of it. This is God's party, and we all want to show our faces. This year, that may not always be visible. The pandemic means that all church services are experiencing drastically reduced numbers, but during the week I see

the same appetite as usual for calling in at church, for lighting a candle, and for visiting the crib in the Narthex.

But this response to the drama also brings us close to God in another way. The greatest threat to our lives with God is our human desire to be in control and to plan and pull all the strings. It sometimes seems to take courage to let things be and see what turns out in the end. But perhaps not courage – just faith. We are not at the centre of our lives, but rather God is, and Christmas is a strange time when in our response to the drama we allow our agenda to be dictated by something else. Whether your response is about feeding visiting relatives, or giving presents to a neighbour's children, or about coming to church to see what is going on, Christmas is a time when we give to each other and not to ourselves. We make the world revolve around something other than ourselves, and in that selflessness and self-emptying we draw closer to God.

If we look at it in this way, the gaudy commercialization of Christmas, the crowds in the shops, and the tacky images which surround us begin to take on a slightly more pleasant taste. However much we may think it, Christmas is not planned by High Street retailers, but they are responding to it just as we do, and in fact just as Mary does in our Gospel reading. Christmas is the biggest drama ever staged, the moment when God became human and shared in the joys and the pain of our lives. All of us, inside and outside church, are hunting round for our response to that drama. At the moment we are waiting for the curtains to go up.

Fr Crispin Pailing