

OT: Micah 5.2-5a

NT: Hebrews 10.5-10

Gp: Luke 1.39-45[46-55]

Back in the 80s when I worked for Mencap, we had a team building day with a number of different exercises. One such involved working in pairs with one person blindfolded and the other responsible for leading them around the room by verbal direction. The final part of the exercise was to encourage the person who couldn't see to fall backwards in the hope that their partner caught them. I suspect Health and Safety would prevent such a thing now but they were different times!

Some people coped with this exercise but others freaked out. Surrendering complete control and trusting another to lead you safely takes some courage. For many of us, this is not our natural stance. We like to have total control, know what and when things are happening, and have the ability to make our own decisions about our actions.

But earlier in Luke's gospel, the story of the Annunciation, Mary surrenders completely to God's will. Asked to do something far more dangerous than falling back and hoping to be caught, Mary agrees to be the Mother of God, telling the angel *'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'*

How could Mary believe the angel? Even for one as holy as she, her first reaction was how can this happen? Mary could have thought it all madness, could have doubted. She must have struggled when she reflected on the message of the angel. But then in today's gospel, Mary experiences reassurance from another, from her cousin, Elizabeth.

Not only have the angel's words about her come to pass, because Elizabeth, despite her age, really is pregnant. But also that yet unborn child responds to the presence of the unborn Messiah and Elizabeth confirms the message of the angel. *For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'*

Let Mary's experience be an encouragement for us. For the times when we struggle with our faith. Many of us may come here week by week. Sometimes because we chose, sometimes because we're on a rota, sometimes even because we think who will play the organ or preach if I don't turn up? We are human and cannot live at the height of a burning faith for long. Sometimes it has to be as a matter of routine, as a matter of hope, as a matter of trust in God.

I have been reading again the poems of R S Thomas this Advent, the Welsh Priest whose ministry was largely in the rugged countryside of the Llyn peninsula. In his poem *In Church*, he describes the vacant building after the congregation has left. How the air recomposes itself around the empty space ready for vigil and the *pews settle from their uneasiness*.

He then says:

*There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.*

In his poetry, Thomas is honest about his struggles with God, how there are times when God seems absent, when waiting is what is required of him, waiting in trust and hope that God will return as he chooses.

This is true for us too if we are honest but just as God reassured Mary through Elizabeth so Christmas can be a time of such reassurance for all Christians. We have waited this Advent, we have hoped, we have doubted but now we have this overwhelming reminder of God's love, of his commitment to us, of his presence, Emmanuel, God is with us. Then like Mary we can sing out with joy:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.*

Our strength and our faith will be renewed to enable us to journey on towards the unseen God who will never deny us his presence but for his own purposes may sometimes hide in the shadows so that when we do find him, we fall to our knees in praise and thanksgiving.

*for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

Revd Michelle Montrose