

## Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 20 December 2020 11.00am

Christophe Borysiewicz

### Let it be with me according to your word.

Our gospel story today is well-known, and we heard it last week when Ellie-Mae read it for us in during the Carol Service as well as this week – and I'll go on to discuss it in a bit – but before I do so, I'd just like to share something about the reading from Second Samuel we heard earlier.

King David is talking with the prophet Nathan. Normally at this time of year we focus on the second half of this passage where Nathan prophesies of the eternal kingdom of the House of David, and we can notice just how much of Nathan's prophesy is echoed by the Angel Gabriel when he is talking with Mary.

But this isn't a normal year, and so I'd like to focus on the first half of the passage. We're always taught that David is a great king – a shepherd boy who is gifted musically, kills Goliath in battle and is a great warrior who conquers Jerusalem. But this is a passage where he doesn't half get the wrong end of the stick. He's done well, and built himself a fine palace. But he's worried, because the sacred things of Israel, the Ark of God, reside in a tent. And so he decides that he should build a great temple for the Ark of God – a proper building for God to reside in.

Nathan, the prophet, agrees with David that this is a cracking idea – but then God comes in a dream to Nathan –

*"I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'"*

In the time of David, God was quite content for the place of worship to be a tent in the wilderness – God did not need an ornate building. And now today, we also no longer worship God in the building and manner that we are used to – we are in a new exile – and worshipping God from our own homes, from our bedrooms, our kitchens and our living rooms – I've even heard of some attending church while taking a bath. And if we read the Bible, then we can be confident that God is delighted for us to notice him and welcome him into our homes more than we normally do - for God lives in our homes as much as in the house we sometimes try to confine her in.

It's so easy to misread God though. David does it, quite spectacularly, in the Old Testament reading – he thinks that what God really wants is a palace to dwell in, when really what God wants is to dwell in our hearts and to be with us always, not just for an hour when we go to Church on Sundays. And it would be so easy for Mary to do likewise in the reading from Luke. The Angel Gabriel comes to Mary and says:

*"Greetings, favoured one!"*

*'The Lord is with you.'*

*'You have found favour with God.'"*

or if your mind thinks better in the lyrics of hymns – and I promise I won't sing this for you now:

*“All hail’ said he, ‘thou lowly maiden Mary,  
Most highly favoured lady.’”*

What would you think if someone came to you with this message? I have found favour with God – perhaps a promotion, maybe riches or power – maybe good health and happiness – a long life spent watching your children mature and develop.

How easy it is to misread God and God's messengers. For the favour that is to be shown to Mary is not comforting and is not one of earthly riches. It is to become pregnant in a time and place where maternal death rates were high and childbirth was dangerous. And it was to become pregnant outside of marriage in a time and place where the stigma to doing so was massive.

And then to see the son who you had borne and nurtured, mature into a man, only to see him executed, and die a gruelling painful death.

God's messengers don't always give us the message that we feel we want, or that we think we might hear at first glance. God's favour to Mary is not earthly riches or health or happiness but an intensely close relationship with God as she becomes the mother of God's son, and then gets to spend much of the rest of her life with Jesus.

Now, I mentioned earlier that even though we are not in church anymore, God is still very definitely with us. And we know that we are all beloved children of God – we could say that we have found favour with God, you, me, each and every one of us. I'll repeat those words from the Angel Gabriel:

*“Greetings, favoured one!  
'The Lord is with you.'  
'You have found favour with God.’”*

What do those words invoke in you? The Lord is indeed with you and with us all – but what does it mean for you or me to have found favour with God? What does God want with us?

From our passages today, I think we can safely say that our favour with God is not something we should take lightly, it is not something that is suggestive of an easy path to riches or acclaim or success. For Mary, it was a transformational experience to find favour with God – one that led to terrifying and dangerous experiences, but one that ultimately led to an intimately closer relationship with God.

As we think about that relationship, we need to remember that it was not just a one-way relationship where God showed her favour, but that when she received the perplexing message from the Angel Gabriel, this is what she replied:

*“Here am I, the servant of the Lord;  
let it be with me according to your word.”*

The Lord was with her, and had shown her favour, and she welcomed him in.

Now some of you might be aware that it's Christmas in a few days' time, and that in some respects, Christmas this year might be - well a bit different from most other years. We might not see the same family members we normally do, we might be in a different place, there might not be the normal assemblies of joy and laughter in the weeks beforehand – some might even forsake buying a bag of nuts, that will linger uncracked for months on the sideboard...

But as we wait and prepare to celebrate Christmas, we need to remember that the eternal truths of Christmas are unchanging - we will be celebrating the culmination of today's story. The God who loves us, come to live among us. The God who loves us, become truly one of us and one with us.

God is with us today just as much as she was with Mary in first century Palestine, and she wants to be part of our lives and welcomed into our hearts and homes this Christmas, just as baby Jesus was welcomed into the lives of Mary & Joseph in first century Palestine.

Are you ready to respond as Mary did all those centuries ago – to welcome in the God who loves us, to welcome in the God who shows us favour, to welcome in the God who will transform our lives?

*“Here am I, the servant of the Lord;  
let it be with me according to your word.”*