



Advent 4 – Waiting on God’s Word

Yesterday, the last Saturday before Christmas, has a special name. As you know, we are fond of giving names to certain days like Mothering Sunday, Fathers’ Day, World Day of Prayer and so forth. Yesterday is called Panic Saturday, because people are panicking about the shopping they have not yet done and they hit the high streets, along with all the other panickers who have not yet bought that special present for Aunty this or Uncle that. An estimated 15million people, yes 15 million people (that’s three times the population of New Zealand, if you are interested) are thought to have descended upon the shopping centres of our great nation in search of bargains.

We can’t, even if we wanted to, wholly escape from the commercial forces that drive our Christmases so relentlessly. But we have to resist it a bit. In a few days’ time we celebrate the great feast of Christmas. Let us remind ourselves: we celebrate nothing less than the coming of God into the world.

In the weeks leading up to this great feast, we have been hearing the voices of the Prophets speaking to us in the Scriptures. Today it is the turn of the prophet Micah who speaks of the one to be born from the house of Bethlehem Ephrathah, the least of the clans of Judah. Not only will Jesus be born in the stable, in truly humble circumstances, but he will be born from the least considered, the least esteemed, of the houses. Each prophet brings his own God-given insight to what will happen but, in the essentials the message is the same: someone is coming, someone will be born who will change the world for ever; God will intervene decisively, he will become part of his creation, he will take flesh and he will dwell among us.

But how did they know, these prophets. How could they know what God was going to do?

They knew because they listened.

They knew because they prayed.

They knew because they were close to God.

And what about those other characters whom we meet? Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist? Mary and Joseph? How did they know what God was going to do.

Because God told them. They knew because his Angel Gabriel told them.

But even more importantly, they listened. There is not much point in being told something unless you listen.

And this brings us closer to the heart of the mystery of faith and prayer. It is all about listening, not speaking. It is about silence, not noise. Time and again, the scriptures speak to

us of how the word of God comes to us when there is silence and space. Elijah in his cave, John the Baptist in the wilderness, Our Lady pondering these things in her heart; our Lord himself up all night in prayer.

We know that there are a two Christmases in our world today. The secular one, which is noisy and frenzied and pressured. And there is the real one: where the Word is made Flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth.

Unless we recover some sense of silence, of time for quiet prayer, we shall not be able to do what we need to do in order to hear God and be transformed by Him. So try and make time to be silent. Try and listen, rather than speak. Resist the pull of the world and its noise and direct your minds and hearts to the voice of the Lord. In our prayer book there is a sentence that we sometimes say: 'Let us listen for the voice of the Lord and enter into his peace.'

To listen to Him is to enter his peace and to learn that his silence is not the silence of emptiness and absence, but the silence of God's presence, a presence that invites us into his loving embrace.

The prophets found that silence and listened.

John the Baptist entered into that silence and listened.

Mary encountered Gabriel in silence and listened.

And all of them responded. All of them acted. All of them did what God asked of them.

And the question that the Gospel poses us is the question asked of them. Will you stop and listen? Will you stop and pray. Will you open your heart and the eyes and ears of faith? And will you then respond as the prophets who said: 'Here am I, send me.' Will you respond as Mary did: 'I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done as you have said?'

There are, I guess, four shopping days left to Christmas.

More importantly, there are four praying days left to Christmas. Please use them wisely and well. Take to the Lord in prayer whatever is on your heart or mind. Ask him, by all means, for those things that you feel you need. Pour on to him all your cares, hopes and troubles. Say whatever you have to say to Him. And then be quiet and spend at least as much time in silence. After all, you would never ask one of your friends something and not wait for the answer. So, when you pray this week, wait for God to respond in whatever way seems good to him so that he may be born in you. Then Christmas will be truly Christmas, and may it be a blessed and holy time for us all.