



### **Advent IV 2023**

**8.30 am & 11 am**

Today we stand on the very threshold of a cave-stable in Bethlehem, the City of David, a community of about 2000 people.

Shepherds are still out on their rough, scrubland fields watching their sheep. As yet, there has been no sightings of the dazzling, terrifying musically-adept Heavenly Host. The Wise Men are a long way further off, somewhere in the East, Herod is very much king in his fortress palace. And no one, apart from the heavily pregnant young woman and the man who knows that the child she is carrying is not his, are resting in the straw amidst Ox and Ass having travelled to take part in Quirinius' census.

What is about to unfold, over the next 12 or so hours, will change the universe, not just the lives of the exhausted couple, but the Universe, they will set off a chain reaction that will lead the baby who is about to be born from Bethlehem to Egypt, from Egypt to Nazareth, from Nazaeth to Jerusalem and from the Temple Mount to the awful execution grounds and necropolis of Golgotha, where his Resurrection rebirth will usher in God's New Creation and and

the offer of a new life in God for everyone one and every thing that was, and is and is still to come.

Now, we know all of that, because we have the gift of hindsight, two thousand years of it. And because of this hindsight it is easy for us to get carried away with the hurrying shepherds, the heavenly choirs, and the journeying wise men – let alone the answer to the greatest Christmas question of all time: will Colin Firth propose to Lucia Moniz, his Portuguese cleaning woman?

Yet the story of the coming hours and all that they lead to, depends on just one thing: the willingness of a young Hebrew woman, still in her early teens, opening herself without reserve, body, mind and soul, to the God whom she loves and follows.

Mary's *fiat* is all that it takes.

Mary lived at a time of great longing and expectation. Whilst the exiled Hebrews had long returned from their Babylonian exile, they were still not free. People longed for a Messiah; they longed for God to act, to do something, to rid them of the occupying forces of Rome.

Yet, in the midst of heightened expectation and the explosion of what we have come to call Apocalyptic writings about the end, and no shortage of would-be messiahs, God chose to act through Mary.

Like other faithful women and men, Mary longed for God's kingdom to come, for the Romans to be gone, for God's reign to be established. But, uniquely, her attentiveness, her transparent, self-less openness allowed God's plan to take shape in her womb.

Mary set no conditions, no limitations, no restrictions – she simply offered herself with the words *“Here I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”*. Mary embraced God’s Word with her whole being: a moment that artists and musicians and poets have tried to capture through more than twenty centuries; I sense that none have come even close!

St Bernard of Clairvaux put it like this in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, more or less when the first of our sequence of four parish churches was being erected on Oxford Street:

Open, Blessed Virgin, your heart to faith,  
your lips to compliance,  
your bosom to your Creator.  
Behold, the desired of all nations stands at the gate and  
knocks.  
Oh, suppose He were to pass by while you delay!  
How would you begin again with sorrow to seek Him  
whom your soul loveth!  
Arise, run, open! Arise by faith, run by devotion, open by  
acceptance.

And, of course, she did: and Mary of Palestine becomes Theotokos, the God bearer.

Some of you will know that one of my all-time favourite payers is a prayer by Cheslyn Jones, a prayer, I first came across on a retreat at Pleshey in Essex.

It’s a prayer to the Holy Spirit and it begins with the petition,

Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life,  
Who didst overshadow Mary that she might become  
The Mother of Jesus our Saviour;

Do thou likewise work silently in my heart  
To form within me the fullness of His redeemed  
And redeeming humanity;

So, as we stand now on the threshold, and later tonight, we will  
dare to step over the threshold,

May Mary, blessed among women,  
Mother of our saviour, pray for us:  
That Christ may be formed in us;  
That we may live in union with heart and will  
With Jesus Christ, her Son,  
Our Lord and Saviour.

This Christmastide may each of us embrace more fully God's daily  
call to us to take our part in the history of salvation; may God the  
Father, by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, form within us  
the fullness of His redeemed and redeeming humanity. Amen.

*Based on a sermon of The Right Reverend Michael Colclough, preached at  
Westminster Abbey on the Feast of Our Lady at Pew, Friday, 21st July 2017*