

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



The Church's prayer for this Sunday – the Fourth Sunday of Advent

God our redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:
grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 20th December 2020, the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Psalm 89

God's covenant with David

A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.

¹ I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD,* for ever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.

² I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

³ You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:

⁴ "I will establish your descendants for ever,
and build your throne for all generations."'

Selah

¹⁹ Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said:
'I have set the crown* on one who is mighty,
I have exalted one chosen from the people.

²⁰ I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
²¹ my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.

²² The enemy shall not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.

²³ I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.

²⁴ My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;

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and in my name his horn shall be exalted.

²⁵ I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.

²⁶ He shall cry to me, “You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!”

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

2 Samuel 7:1-11,16

God’s Promise to David

⁷ After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ² he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.”

³ Nathan replied to the king, “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.”

⁴ But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying:

⁵ “Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?’ ⁶ I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. ⁷ Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’”

⁸ “Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. ⁹ I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. ¹⁰ And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning ¹¹ and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders^[a] over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

‘The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you:’

¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me^[a]; your throne will be established forever.”

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Luke 1:26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Reflection from Revd David Newton

On first reading, these two passages (that are set for us in the lead up to Christmas) are full of the joys and hopes of the season. We hear of a Kingdom that will last forever and a people being planted in their own land where none shall afflict them. We hear of the one who has found favour with the Lord and of miraculous pregnancies. We hear of Mary's faithfulness and obedience when she says, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'.

How lovely, how rousing, how inspiring.

Yet, if we dig a little deeper there are some rather significant difficulties that these passages throw up for us if we might allow them the space to do so.

First, we are faced with the difficulty that (at face value at least) the promises we read of in 2 Samuel 7 did not come to fruition. We are so used to reading this passage through Christian lenses that we miss the more obvious reading...

David's throne was not established forever; the people did not live undisturbed. As soon as David's Son Solomon died the Kingdom was torn in two as brothers fought for power. And it

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was not many generations after that until the Northern Kingdom was swept up into the Assyrian Empire. A few generations after that the people of Judea were exiled to Babylon. The history from that point until the time of Jesus remained one of either assimilation or oppression under mighty empires – Greek and then Roman.

But then, centuries later, Mary hears this same promise re-ignited; her Son is to be given this ancient throne, and – she is told – his Kingdom will never end. As Christians we hear these words of Nathan the prophet to David as being given new life 8 or 9 centuries later!

The spark of hope for this everlasting kingdom has not gone out. The promise remains....

However, this everlasting kingdom is not what Mary – let alone her compatriots – were expecting. The promise remains, the hope is reignited, God's faithfulness is proved true.... And yet... the only crown this King will wear is a crown of thorns, the only 'Kingdom' that he can speak of is a small group of eccentrics, misfits, zealots and sinners who follow him around. And this king promises no undisturbed sleep, no place to 'plant oneself' free from strife. Instead, this strange king promises quite the opposite: nowhere to lay one's head. He promises that finding life is only possible in giving it away.

Hope remains, the promise remains, God's faithfulness is proved true yes, but in ways no one expected.

As we limp on through these days, we cling to the same truths, even as they might be difficult to see, even as we have to re-think what they might mean.

As this year has not turned out as we had hoped or expected; as we ask the question why and wherefore; as we cry, 'where are you God'; or as we join in the Psalmists cry 'How Long O Lord', we are reminded that God's faithfulness remains.

In the waiting, we hold on to the hope of God's presence, here and now – becoming manifest in this moment of love, that moment of kindness and generosity. We hold on to the hope of God's presence into the future, as we think of what might come and what might grow out of all this.

The words of Nathan were not fulfilled as the people had hoped and yet that did not nullify the promises of God. Hope remained through the darker and quieter days, until an angel appeared to a young woman in Nazareth.

Which brings us onto our second reading and our second "difficulty" – the figure of Mary. Or perhaps I should say the difficulties around how Mary has been 'read' throughout Christian history.

Here is the model Christian, we might think, passive and obedient. 'Be it to me according to your word' she says in humble, submissive obedience to a "Father" god. The ways in which this line has shored up the foundations of patriarchy through the centuries – even up to our day - are not hard to imagine. And theological history is rife with examples of a "Marian" Theology which push in exactly this direction.

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The problem stems from taking this single line of Mary's in idealised isolation from the implied reality around it. We are presented with a cameo of Mary kneeling and passive before the divine Father. It's not a great image. But broaden the canvas, play the film forwards and backwards, and a rather different picture emerges of a woman full of grit and determination. We do not know much of her, but what we do know shows her as anything but meek, passive and mild. She flees to Egypt with her son. She pushes him to turn water into wine. She endures the pain of witnessing her son's crucifixion.

Mary might indeed be a good model of discipleship, but only if we ditch the cameo. We are not called to be passive before a patriarchal god. The true LORD calls us to be people of grit and determination.

Which brings us back to hope...

For it is only if we are sure that hope remains – that the way things are is not the way they have to be – that we have the resources we need to act in the face of darkness, or difficulty or oppression or injustice.

Because there is hope, because God's promises remain, because God has proved faithful – even when we can't see it - we are able to do more than simply resign ourselves to fate; we can do more than simply say 'let it be', and instead can be - like Mary - bearers of hope.

Our witness to such hope and to the promises of God might well come in small and seemingly insignificant moments and events: sending a card, picking up the phone, offering a kind word, offering forgiveness, sharing possessions and so forth.

But isn't that just the point – the Hope for the World was found in a small seemingly insignificant babe lying in a manger. The Hope of the World was found in a dark corner. The Hope of the World was found amidst an oppressed people. Amen.