4th Sunday of Advent (Year B)



'Presence or Presence?'

After what has been a challenging year, most of us have been looking forward to Christmas. An opportunity to spend time with our families, to give and receive cards and presents. A time to gather together around the dinner table for a festive feast and yes, for many of us a time to eat and drink too much!

This year however, it is going to be a very different Christmas for most of us. The recent announcement by the Prime minister that the Southeast of England has been moved into the tier 4 category means that people will not be able to mix with other households indoors and only meet with one person from another household outside. The focus will be not so much on *presents* but on *presence* by that I mean who will or not be present this year. For many families there will sadly be absentees.

As humans we are social animals, interacting with one another is an intrinsic part of who we are. The past year has painfully highlighted the importance of relationships. We value being with family and friends and many of us miss being able to give our loved ones a hug. We are also spiritual beings. However, I wonder if our hunger for a deeper relationship with God is as great as that of our own earthly families?

Let's take a look at today's lectionary readings for the 4th Sunday of Advent. Our Old Testament reading from 2 Samuel 7 begins with the prophet Samuel discussing the appropriateness of King David building a temple for God in Jerusalem. Up until then, the Israelites had predominantly

experienced the presence of God dwelling within a purposed built tent or tabernacle which moved with them wherever they went. (7:6-7). Yet God cannot be limited to one particular place or people. The Lord doesn't need a humanly constructed temple or tent in which to dwell; for God's boundaries are infinite. God is for people of all races and nations.

The Lord speaking through the prophet began by reminding David of his roots, how he had been an ordinary working shepherd until he had been called and anointed as King of Israel. The Lord had even greater plans that would one day benefit all generations. For it would be through David's offspring that God would establish an everlasting kingdom. This would be ultimately fulfilled in the birth of one of David's descendants Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, whose birth we celebrate this week.

I suggest that David was specifically chosen by God because of his openness and receptivity to God and his willingness to be led and guided. In the same way Mary, the mother of Jesus was an apparently ordinary unmarried young woman who was engaged to be married. Again, I suggest that Mary was chosen to bare the Christ-child because of her openness. Significantly her fiancé, a man named Joseph was a descendant of King David (Luke 1:27). The announcement to Mary was the advent of the Christ and came in an extraordinary way via an angel - a messenger from God whose opening words were "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you" (1:28).

Let's pause for a moment to take on board the significance of these words. The almighty and eternal God was with Mary in a very special way. Mary had been chosen to give birth to a son who she was to name Jesus. He would establish an eternal kingdom, thus fulfilling the words the prophet Samuel spoke to his ancestor David. God's dwelling place would henceforth

no longer be invisible or constrained to a physical building but visible and indwelling in human form – Jesus Christ.

Mary's response to God's intervention in her life was total receptivity – "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38). I wonder how many of us can respond to God in this open and honest way and truly mean it?

This Christmas there is a special guest who longs to be in the midst of our families. God in Christ wants to join our bubbles no matter how small they may be. The response to this invitation can only come from us. Like King David and the Blessed Virgin Mary, we too need to be receptive. Can I encourage all of us to welcome and receive the Christ into our hearts and homes this Christmas. Amen.

Rev. Andrew Jacobson
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