

## Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Advent 2020 (Year B)

One thing that everyone will agree on is that we are living in uncertain times. It is far harder to see what the future holds today than it was a year ago. We are a few days from the end of the Brexit transition period, and we have no idea what will come after it; the Covid pandemic makes it impossible to plan for anything even a few days ahead, let alone weeks or months; simmering away in the background is the knowledge that our climate is changing and we cannot really work out what impact this will have on our lives. These are uncertain times indeed.

But if we look at the story of the Holy Family, we get a glimpse of real uncertainty. The angel tells Mary that she has been chosen to be the mother of God's Son, that he will reign on the throne of his ancestor David for ever, and that the child will be born of the Holy Spirit. And then, when she says 'yes' to this, the angel leaves. These must be some of the most remarkable words in the whole of the Gospels: 'The angel left her'. He has turned her world upside down, and he leaves. How is this all going to happen? What will Joseph say? What does it mean that he will rule on David's throne? What is to become of us? And the same is true for Joseph. How did he feel when Mary told him the news? His mind must have been flooded with uncertainty. Even after his own visit from an angel and his decision to go through with the marriage to Mary, there must have been so many unanswered questions. What should he be doing with such an important child? How will it all play out? When will he begin to rule as king? What will happen to his parents? Then there is the practical matter of how to get safely to Bethlehem; then how to get safely to Egypt when the king is out to kill the child. Where to live in Egypt; how to make a living there; how to know when it is safe to come back; where to settle when they return; how to put a roof over their heads and food on their table. Most important and uncertain and scary of all, for both Mary and Joseph, how to keep this child safe. He is destined for such great things, his life is so important but also so fragile, so very fragile. And then, as the weeks turn into months, then into years, they must have asked themselves: when and how will it start? When will he stop being an ordinary child and become a king, and how will that work? Perhaps every day they asked themselves: will this be the day? Perhaps they dreaded the disruption of a happy settled life. And as the years go by and Jesus turns from a child to a man and still nothing happens, they must have wondered: was that dream really just a dream? Has it all gone wrong? Has God changed his mind? Have we somehow messed this whole thing up?

My goodness! And we think that we live in uncertain times! Perhaps the truth is that times have always been uncertain, but we have been lucky enough to live through a rare time of certainty and stability. For most of our country's history people on this land have lived one or two bad harvests from starvation; many people around the world still do. We have had the privilege of mapping and planning our lives out, and we feel the loss of that privilege severely. But as this year of uncertainty comes to a close, and another year of uncertainty begins, perhaps we could look to the Holy Family as a model for coming to terms with this new way of living.

What Mary and Joseph manage to do, in the face of all these unknowns, is simply to focus on the child: not because he is their child, but because he is their Saviour. If they had stopped to ask all those questions in one go, it would have been overwhelming. So day by day, and little by little, they make their lives fit into a routine of protecting and loving the child that has been entrusted to them. Everything else fits into a daily pattern of making a safe place for God at the heart of their lives. Rather than let themselves be overwhelmed by all the questions, they make a daily discipline of keeping safe the dwelling place of God. They decline to be diverted from that, panicked into worrying about incidentals. Is God close to them? Yes he is. Does he love them? Yes he does. Does he have a role for them? Yes he does. And so they get on with it. There is no uncertainty there, and in the light of these three sure facts: God is close to them, God loves them, and he has a task for them to perform, all the uncertainties melt into the background.

We don't know where the coming year will lead us, but Mary invites us into the Annunciation scene today. She beckons us in, to rest a while in her presence so that we can learn from her and draw strength from her. Already, even before the angel has left, she is making a safe place in her life where she can treasure the presence of God, and in doing so the storms of uncertainty settle a little. As the turning of the year approaches we are bound to think of what the future might hold, and Mary draws us to her school of calmness. She invites us to spend time with her Son and find in him the still centre that has helped our ancestors through centuries of precarious living. Is God close to you? Yes, he is. Does he love you? Yes, he does. Does he have a task for you? Yes, he does. The times ahead may be difficult, perhaps even very difficult for some of us, but Mary's calm and simple but unshakeable focus is given to us to help us through this. Lets sit at her feet for a while, and draw strength from her strength.