

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year C)  
Sunday December 19<sup>th</sup> 2021

Mary has just found out two things: she has been told that she is to be the mother of God's son, the Saviour; and she has discovered that Elizabeth, her relative, is already in the sixth month of her pregnancy. She has been given no further instructions, that is all that she knows. Her reaction is to do something that will bring together these two extraordinary facts; they might seem almost unrelated, but she knows differently, and so she hurries, immediately, without delay, to be with Elizabeth. The young woman, scarcely more than a girl, hurries to be with her cousin. Does she go because she wants Elizabeth's help and support? Or does she go so that she can, herself, offer support? Does she go just to share her news? We don't know, perhaps it is a combination of them all, perhaps it is just a vague sense that the two of them belong together. But the moment that she arrives at Elizabeth's home, Mary receives what is, in effect, another message from God. The very moment that she arrives the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy; and Elizabeth cries out with a great shout. It is nice to be made to feel welcome, but this really is something else.

There is no doubt that for Elizabeth life is feeling a bit edgy. She is too old, really, to be carrying a child and until now she has been unable to conceive. The circumstances of this pregnancy are strange and unsettling. She doesn't really know where it will all lead. Perhaps she feels rather isolated and confused by all that is happening. And then she sees Mary, and everything changes. The child within her leaps for joy, and before she can help herself she cries out in wonder. Seeing Mary, Elizabeth is overwhelmed with a sense that, in spite of the confusion and the strangeness and the surprise and the anxiety, now all is well. This overwhelming feeling that now all is well is what we call 'joy', and it is one of the defining graces of the Christmas season.

Christmas, for us, can be a bundle of confused and jumbled emotions, There is lots of excitement and anticipation, but also there can be an element of stress, and anxiety and tiredness. St Paul VI once said that our society 'has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy' (*Gaudete in Domino* 1975) and this is never more true than at Christmas. The expectation of pleasure from food, drink, gifts, people is higher than at any other time of year; the expectations that we put on ourselves and on one another bring their own stresses, and it can be hard to capture that sense that now all is well, the feeling that distinguishes joy from mere pleasure. Mary steps into the Advent story that will soon become the Christmas story in order to guide us into joy.

Always the last Sunday of Advent focusses on Mary. She is to be our guide as we make our final preparations for Christmas. She has the unique wisdom that will allow us to make the most of the coming feast, and she beckons us into the story, to join her now, because she has something to show us. In this Gospel we read about a tense and anxious situation that is all set to rights by the coming of Mary. She may be very young, she may be inexperienced,

but she is loving, she is humble and she is wise, and when she steps into Elizabeth's home, carrying the unborn Christ within her, the comforting sense that now all is well settles on that home and its occupants.

This Gospel is, I think, a kind of training exercise, gifted to us by Mary. Come with me, watch what I do, stand beside me and observe. Observe something very special, but also very simple. Observe the inner dynamic of Christmas. This is what we are going to do. We are going to go into a situation of tension and anxiety, and we are going to be a strong and loving presence that will change anxiety into the sense that now all is well; worry will become joy. Mary is a Herald of Joy, she takes with her into Elizabeth's house not only her own wisdom and tenderness, but she also takes in Jesus himself, and that is enough to turn everything around.

We know the Christmas story very well, it holds no surprises for us. We know the parts that all the actors will play. But today Mary shows us the role that we have to play. Like her, we need to be Heralds of Joy, carrying Jesus Christ with us in to all the places which seem dark and cheerless, all the places where people do not really know how to cope. We are summoned to be like Mary, to bring Christ into those places so that a sense that now all will be well – not, perhaps easy, but all the same well. She would like us to know the strength that comes from her wisdom, humility and love. All is well at last Elizabeth. And, knowing that, feeling that, experiencing that, she wants us to do the same. She has shown us how it is done, and now with infinite gentleness, she points us outwards and says 'Off you go, take the strength that you have received and use it wisely. Take the love of God into the homes of people who need it so badly. For whom will you be a calming, loving gentle and confident presence? For whom will you be the catalyst that allows them to say Now all will be well?' Now all will be well – this knowledge is joy, it is the joy of Christmas, and it is so very close. For whom will you be a bearer of joy this year?