

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year A)
18th December 2022

In today's Gospel we hear the angel speak to St Joseph:

'do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit'

- that is to say, 'Do not be afraid, God is at work'.

This echoes the message of the angel that appears to Mary at the Annunciation:

'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God'

- that is to say, once again, 'Do not be afraid, God is at work'.

Both Mary and Joseph hear the same message: there is no need for fear, God is stirring, he is at work, he is acting, he is present.

There is, perhaps, no more destructive emotion than fear. It paralyses us, leaves us unable to act, unable to decide. When we do act, motivated by fear, we tend to lash out, to strike first, to disable that which we are afraid of. In doing so we often bring about precisely the disaster that we hoped to avoid. The powerful dictator is frightened, frightened that he may be deposed, frightened that in the end his life will amount to nothing, frightened that he will appear weak, and so he unleashes death and destruction on others, only to appear exactly the frightened weakling that he wanted to avoid. Public figures are frightened of losing influence, frightened of being forgotten or ignored, frightened that the spotlight will turn elsewhere, and so they must find increasingly extreme ways to gain the attention of others. Wealthy people become frightened that their wealth will pass, or frightened they will be overtaken by others, and so they must accumulate more and more. The power of fear to drive people apart, to set them against one another, to turn brothers and sisters into enemies, is truly appalling.

So it is no surprise that into a world where fear stalks, the angel comes to speak a word of serenity. 'Do not be afraid'. And this is no trite platitude, the angel gives the reason why we should not be afraid: God is at work.

There are more levels of significance to these words, too. I am imagining Mary now, waiting for her son to be born. There are just days left, and it is all very unsettling. There will have to be a journey to Bethlehem with all the discomfort, danger and uncertainty that this involves. And also, surely she cannot get the events of nine months ago out of her mind. The angel's visit, the strange circumstances of her son's conception, the mysterious prophecies about his future, and the miraculous child already born to her cousin Elizabeth. Mary's mind in these last days must be a jumble of excitement, joy, anxiety and uncertainty. I am imagining Joseph, now, standing beside her. Joseph is the great protector, and so it is easy to imagine him echoing the angel's

words to Mary: 'Do not be afraid – God is at work'. No doubt Joseph, too, had his moments of anxiety and doubt and so perhaps Mary does the same for him: Do not be afraid, the Lord is working, quietly, hidden, but powerful.

So Mary and Joseph echo to one another, each in the other's times of anxiety, the angel's words: Do not be afraid. And in this we enter another level of meaning, because here we can see the foundation of the Holy Family, we can see the essence of married love, as husband and wife each encourage the other in times of doubt: Do not be afraid.

These are anxious times – but perhaps, to be fair, all times are anxious ones. Part of the message that the Church has to proclaim to the world is this message: Do not be afraid, God is at work. Do not let fear make you angry or violent; do not let fear divide you from others, or turn you against them; do not let fear destroy trust, or undermine the universal brotherhood of all human people; do not let fear make you greedy, or proud; do not let fear stop you saying 'I am sorry, I got this wrong'.

I have discovered the daily messages that are broadcast by the Greek Catholic Archbishop of Kyiv, and in the most recent one, speaking from a church in a city in Donetsk, a city that was being hit by missiles as he visited it, he said *'Indifference kills, caring and solidarity saves'*. In his own way he is proclaiming to people who have plenty to be afraid of 'Do not be afraid, God is at work, even here, even now, even in the midst of brutality and cruelty'. He went on to say: *'we humanly think that when we share, then we lose, but here God's word says the opposite: what you share, comes back to you again and twice as much as you gave'*.

Fear is one of the Devil's favourite tools, because it destabilises us, throws us off balance, makes us strangers to our best selves. So it is no surprise that, whether speaking to Mary or to Joseph, the angel begins by telling them to banish fear. It is a part of the Church's role to proclaim again the message of the angel to the people of today. Do not be afraid; God is at work – and, furthermore, let me show you how he is working, and let me show you how he will help you overcome fear, let me be a source of hope for you, let me be the one who disarms your fear.

As we prepare for Christmas we might spend some time in prayer with the angel's message: God is at work, there is no need to be afraid. He is at work through us – we are heralds of the message but also the instruments through which it is made real, the tools through which fear is dispelled. This is how we make our final preparations for the coming feast.