

## Homily: Fourth Sunday of Advent 2020

Like many people yesterday afternoon, I sat down and watched the news briefing from Downing Street, wondering what news would be shared, and what new measures might be put in place. It's a familiar experience – many times over the last few months we've all waited for the next announcement, unsure of what effect it will have on our lives. Almost always these briefings seem to bring some bad news, and we find ourselves weighed down by it. We look for some sign of things getting better, some indication of when it will end, some idea of when our normal lives can resume. In other words, we look for hope.

And as we do so, we hear today another piece of news – not delivered to TV cameras in a news conference at the centre of power in London, but delivered by an angel to a young woman, a virgin whose name is Mary, in the tiny village of Nazareth in Galilee. In this small, insignificant place, to a young, and – in the eyes of the world – insignificant woman, a piece of news is announced which will change the world. "You are to conceive and bear a Son". This is earth-shattering news. Every woman who has ever discovered that she is pregnant for the first time knows that this news transforms her life. For Mary, life will never be the same again. But it's also transformative for our world: because of this news, because of this child, the world will never be the same again. The world will never again be without hope.

But first, Mary has a choice to make. She has been told of her vocation: she is to be the mother of the Saviour, the Son of the Most High. Like anyone called by God, she is free: she can choose to accept this calling, or to reject it. God never forces us to obey Him. Every vocation is a gift which may be welcomed or refused. But whenever we make a choice in response to God's call, others are affected. Whenever anyone accepts their call from God, whether it be to be a husband or wife, a parent, to enter religious life, to be a priest, to live as a single person serving God and others in some particular way... whenever we accept God's call, others will benefit from our 'yes'. And this is more true of Mary than of anyone else in human history.

In fact, Mary stands here as a representative of the whole human race. God wants to enter our world, but He will not come in uninvited. He wants to share our human nature, but He will not take on our nature without our willingness. He asks permission; He is knocking at the door. Somebody must decide. And the person who makes the choice is not the Roman Emperor, or some other great leader or dignitary; it is the humble virgin of Nazareth, the unknown girl called Mary. She stands for us all; she decides for us all; she welcomes Jesus on behalf of us all.

In doing so, Mary teaches us, in every generation, how to welcome her Son. She teaches us to be humble and open to God's call, to listen for the subtle ways in which He knocks at the doors of our hearts, and to allow Him to enter. She shows us that even if we are small and insignificant in the eyes of the world, we are precious to God and play a part in His plan. By the life of prayer and contemplation which she lived before and after this moment, she shows us how to listen attentively to the Lord's voice. By faithfully walking with her Son, on

a journey that took her even to the foot of the Cross, she teaches us the importance of faithfully following wherever Christ leads us.

And so, she says 'yes'; and in this moment, God enters our world. God enters a world in need of hope, in need of a Saviour. Perhaps that's why the angel greets her with the word, "Rejoice!" This angel, this messenger, brings Good News – the news of salvation.

After a year of so much bad news, and so much suffering, the Church invites us to hear this Good News today. We are invited to hear afresh the angel's message, and His greeting: "Rejoice!" In Jesus, God came to earth. In doing so, He brought salvation. That didn't mean there was an instant end to suffering – poverty, disease, wars are all, tragically, still very much a part of our world. But into this world, into the suffering, comes God. Because of this news, because of Mary's yes, everyone who has faith in Jesus knows that, even in the darkest of times, they are never alone: God is with us, always. Nothing can ever separate us from Him. And because of this meeting in Nazareth, the world can never again be without hope, because God Himself has entered our world and saved us. Suffering can never again have the last word: there is always a brighter future, always something to look forward to. Mary's life was turned upside down by this news, without doubt; and it can transform our lives, too, if we never forget the closeness of the God who is with us, and allow ourselves to live by the hope He brings.

Fr Andrew

