

On this Sunday, the day before Christmas, it is lovely to be celebrating a Baptism in the context of our morning service. I want to begin with the sense of anticipation and excitement that comes with the expected arrival of a child in a house.

There are all those questions that are asked of parents. When is the baby due? Do you know whether it is to be a boy or a girl? Have you chosen any names yet? The mother is asked all those intrusive questions, are you happy, are you surprised, are you feeling well, are you feeling sick, how long will you be working for?

Then for the parents themselves there are those first precious signs of life; those first kicks, listening for the heart beat. Then we go for those first ultrasound scans. In our day there was a white haze with the vague outline of a skull – now of course you see the head, the arms, the legs, even features of the face. Then there is the whole process of preparing for the arrival of the child in the home. I don't mean just the paraphernalia of cots, car seats, push chairs, changing mats and all the rest. A new life is coming, a new life that is going to change that home for ever.

As parents we wonder what lies ahead for our children. How will this world, this country, this society be in 20, 30, 40 years time? What talents will they develop, what career paths will they follow, what relationships will they form? For John and Catherine's parents, as with all grandparents, to see the arrival of your grandchildren is a wonderful milestone in our own journey of parenthood.

What we are talking about here is a sense of anticipation, of expectation, of excitement. It is with these emotions in mind that approach our reading of our Gospel reading, the account of the visit of one expectant mother to another, of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth. We are told that Elizabeth's child, who would grow up to be John the Baptist, stirred in the womb as Mary entered the house. Elizabeth greets Mary with words of homage and affection. In the story as related to us by St Luke, Mary responds in words that are now known to us as the Magnificat, sung as one of the canticles at Evening Prayer.

The words speak of the nature of God's coming Kingdom. As we were thinking about last Sunday, there was an expectation in contemporary Judaism of a Messianic figure who would overthrow Roman rule and usher in a new Kingdom, God's Kingdom, centred on Jerusalem. The Magnificat speaks, in what I've called 'upside down' language of God's coming in very different terms.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. *Luke 1:50-53*

Words which echo the message of Isaiah that Jesus was read in the synagogue of his home town in Nazareth:

he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;

²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,

This is the man whose birth we celebrate; this is the Christ we prepare to welcome in our hearts. As we were thinking last week, Advent and Christmas remind us that ours is an incarnational faith; that in the person of Jesus we come face to face with God; that in the person of Jesus was and continues to be living and active in the world, in the lives of those standing on the side of the poor and the marginalised, those taking a stand for justice in the face of injustice, those bearing witness to peace and reconciliation in the face of those who would foster division. In short, in the life and ministry of Jesus, his teaching in word and action, God offers a different vision, a different perspective on this wounded and troubled world, a vision we are called to share in our personal and community life.

As followers of Christ, as ones baptised in the name of Christ, we are called to offer that different vision. In the face of despair we are called to offer hope; in the world where sleight of hand, where half truth and innuendo have seemed to prevail, we are called to be signs of integrity, of truth. In a world that is fractured along so many lines of culture, of race, economically, socially, we are called to be instruments of reconciliation. May the child we baptise today come to see something of that vision in the life of her family, in the life of this community.