

Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

22nd December 2024

First Reading: Micah 5:2-5a

The Lord said to his people:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,

who are one of the little clans of Judah,

from you shall come forth for me

one who is to rule in Israel,

whose origin is from of old,

from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time

when she who is in labour has brought forth;

then the rest of his kindred shall return

to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,

in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great

to the ends of the earth;

and he shall be the one of peace.

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10

When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)." When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Gospel: St Luke 1:39-55

Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Having looked in turn at the themes of hope, peace and joy, on this fourth and last Sunday of Advent, we come to love. As I hope you have been discovering, they are all closely related to one another. Indeed, when I have been choosing hymns for our Advent services with these themes in mind, I have discovered how many of the hymns mention more than one of them. Last week, in Ullapool and Achiltibuie, we had *Hills of the north, rejoice!* Aside from joy, love and hope are both mentioned. Another hymn I have used this Advent, *Give me joy in my heart*, also has verses for peace and love. In his letter to the Galatians, in his well-known list of the fruits of the spirit, Paul begins: 'love, joy, peace...'

It is perhaps important that Paul's list begins with love, for all these themes we have been looking at are gifts from God. As I said last week, hope, peace and joy are rooted in God's character and God's promises, but above all, they are rooted in God's unconditional love for all that he has created through that love.

Mary, although she does not use the word, recognises 'love' in her song, the Magnificat, which forms the second part of today's Gospel reading, extolling God's love, not only for her, but for all peoples, especially those who have been downtrodden and oppressed. But it is a love that is also demanding, if not somewhat threatening. It is a love that will turn the world upside down, as the Gospel so often does. Love that challenges and demands change, especially if one is counted amongst the rich, proud or powerful of the world – which almost any one of us in this nation could be in comparison with so many others across the world. The love of God is against anything that separates people from God's love and the blessings he would pour on all people.

The love of God that Mary alludes to is not the romantic, sentimental love we often think of, but something rather more robust. We might call it sacrificial love, and the child that Mary was expecting was the gift of God's Son who would make the ultimate sacrifice, who would give his life for the world. In the passage from the letter to the Hebrews, the writer refers to Jesus as having said that he came to do God's will. This voluntary, self-offering of Jesus achieved what the Temple sacrificial system, although laid down in God's Law, could never achieve: the deep healing that brings forgiveness and restores flawed human beings to proper relationship with God.

But God's sacrificial love for us, demands our sacrificial love in return. There is another Advent hymn, of which I am very fond, that begins *Thou didst leave thy throne and thy royal crown when thou camest to earth for me*. The verses speak of the many ways in which Jesus was rejected during his earthly life, but the refrain of each verse is: *O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee*.

It's important that we do make room in hearts, and indeed time in our lives, for Jesus, but there is more to the sacrificial love we are called to than that. It's challenging: we are called to love as God loves us, in preparation for Christ's return. As the Magnificat reminds us, to oppose those who oppress and marginalise others, to support the neglected, the hungry and the poor, to speak out against injustice, to call upon those in positions of power and authority to heed their responsibilities. I know I don't do those things anything like as often as I should.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, Paul's great chapter on love, he reminds us of its over-arching importance, that, without love, everything else we do is worthless. We are reminded that love is patient, kind, not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude, not self-serving; it rejoices in truth; it will never end. Sacrificial love requires us, to set aside our own desires, our own agenda, our own good, for the benefit of others. Again, I know I have fallen short. The chapter ends: 'Faith, hope and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love'.

Christina Rossetti's poem *Love came down at Christmas* holds these two aspects of sacrificial love, God's love for us and the love to which we are called, together. It begins:

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.

This first verse evokes the familiar Christmas story and the stable scene without actually describing it. 'Love was born at Christmas' – we can picture the newborn baby Jesus as 'Love all lovely'. But 'love divine' also moves us beyond the simple Christmas story to the deeper meaning, just as in Advent we reflect both on Christ's coming as a baby that first Christmas and the deeper significance that Christ will come again in glory. And Christ's coming was so important, there were two signs: the star for the wise men and the angels' announcement to the shepherds.

The second verse moves to us:

Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?

We worship God, both human, incarnate as the baby Jesus, and the divine king. We celebrate God's love for us. But then that last line, a question: 'But wherewith for sacred sign?' It's an old-fashioned phrase, but it echoes the first verse. If the star and angels were the signs of God's love that first Christmas, what are the signs that will make God's love visible in the world now?

And the third verse tries to answer that question:

Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

God's love is seen in the love lived out in you and me – our love for God and for all people and all creation.