



Sunday, 23rd December 2018 – Advent 4
Sermon for 10.00am Eucharist at St Andrew's Parish Church Guernsey
Readings: Hebrews 10:5-10, Gospel St Luke 1:39-45
'Come, Lord Jesus – the Champion of the Oppressed'
Given by Rev Juliette E C Robilliard

It's the season for Christmas parties: a chance to meet people and engage on diverse topics of conversation, until, that is, we meet the party bore! Someone who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of one subject - electrical conductivity. Woe betide you if you ask for any clarification, as waxing lyrical, the bore will regale you with another lecture or, worse, give a smug comment. "Oh! I thought everybody knew that L.E.D. stands for light-emitting diode!"

Earlier, in the liturgy, there was a word of Greek or was it Aramaic? Unless you've studied both, which I haven't, clarification without a smug comment is helpful. The word was Maranatha! You all gave the translation with your response "Come, Lord Jesus." You might now be thinking "Well what was the point of using 'Maranatha'! Why not leave that out?" I looked it up. The single word has an extra nuance that 'Come, Lord Jesus' doesn't evoke. Maranatha is the cry of the oppressed and the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom, we remember today, would have known that only too well. I'll explain by illustration.

Of the couples I've married, most had been living together for many years with children to prove it. It's wonderful when a couple realise that their commitment to each other is for life and that they want to confirm that, in church, before God. But wind the clock back a few decades and imagine, ladies, the reaction we would have received if, when young, unmarried teenagers we had gone home and said to our parents "You're going to be grandparents!" The reaction would likely have been horror that shame had been visited upon them. It would have been even worse in Mary's day when the Jewish culture and creed were inextricably inter-linked.

We can imagine the reaction from Mary's neighbours and those at the synagogue. She's likely to have been ostracised for, in those days, no self-respecting parent would have wanted their own daughter associating with, seemingly, such a wanton girl. "Oh, she may have said she'd been visited by an angel but that's a likely story!" Society has such a closed mind. Sadly, how often have we also been as judgemental?

No wonder then that for a bit of respite Mary left her home and headed off into the Judean countryside to visit her older cousin Elizabeth who doubtless would have suffered sniggers too. "You know Elizabeth? We'll you'll never guess what! She's pregnant and at her age too! Whatever next!" The fact that her faithful prayers had been answered would have been disregarded by the gossips.

Elizabeth must have been the most enormous consolation for Mary. Instead of vilification, Mary is greeted with rejoicing and, even better Elizabeth, moved by the Holy Spirit, affirms that Mary is carrying the Christ-child, the Lord, the long-expected Messiah. We can understand the depths of Mary's relief as joy pours out of her. She exclaims "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." "Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed." At last, Mary feels the truth will be revealed not just to her neighbours but to all people and, wonder of wonders, God has chosen her to help make it happen.

Mary's faith gives hope to countless thousands of oppressed people throughout all generations. Those who have suffered appallingly, whether victims of sexual abuse; refugees fleeing political and spiritual persecution; those affected by criminal activity or, abused by underhand and as unloving bullying, gossip or snide activities intended to demean. By contrast, Mary shows us that being obedient to God's will, even in the face of adversity, is an act of strength not weakness for God's truth will triumph. For he does scatter the proud and those who have abused their positions of authority or seniority. He does fill the hungry, with the wealth of his love for he has mercy, remembering the covenant he made for all generations with his faithful children: and so, like Mary, we can be blessed indeed.

In the light of that background, the reading from Hebrews challenges us. It informs that God takes no pleasure in religious ritual. Putting it another way, God does not award loyalty points for performing the right liturgy at church each Sunday. Rather, he focuses on how we engage with him when we get here. God looks for obedient hearts, as Christ, who said, "I have come to do your will." Can we say the same?

Amen.