



20 December 2020
The 4th Sunday of Advent – Carol Service at 3pm
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr John Russell

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

Today is the 4th Sunday of Advent. The gospel reading this morning was the Annunciation by the Angel Gabriel to Mary, and it's a much-loved motif in the carols and songs we shall enjoy this evening. So I think it's unavoidably time for us to talk about the woman affectionately known in churches somewhat more Anglo-Catholic than ours as 'the BVM', and see if she might have something to say to us about unpredictable and challenging Christmases.

Since the year 40AD, there have been over 2,000 reported apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus. The Anglican Communion has officially recognised just three of these: firstly, at Walsingham in Norfolk where Mary appeared in 1061; secondly, at Lourdes in France, when Our Lady appeared to 14-year old Bernadette Sou-bi-rou in the mid-19th century; and thirdly, and most recently, at Yankalilla – a small agricultural town in South Australia where, in 1994, an image of Mary cradling her crucified son appeared on a wall behind the altar in an Anglican stone church.

Mary is a profoundly political figure – the object of many competing interpretations. Certain strands of church tradition have presented Mary as an ideal of femininity personified – soft, gentle, receptive, yielding, obedient. She has been used to promote a moralizing idea of virginity as an essential sign of goodness. Mary has even been used to support the idea that women are inferior to men in the order of creation and society. It can be surprising to discover that Walsingham in Norfolk and Yankalilla in South Australia, with their enthusiastic Marian devotions, both maintain conservative ideas about women in the ministry of the church. The shrine at Walsingham will not allow female priests to celebrate the Eucharist there; and the Anglican diocese in which Yankalilla sits does not ordain women to the priesthood.

But elsewhere in the world, Mary has very different political associations. In 1531, Mary revealed herself to a Mexican peasant called Juan Diego, in a suburb of Mexico City. Although it was wintertime, Mary brought forth flowers and imprinted her image on his cloak, becoming known as Our Lady of

Guadalupe, and a unifying national symbol for Mexican identity ever since. Her image was what Mexicans carried into their war against Spain for independence in 1810 and their internal revolution a hundred years later. In the 1960s, when civil rights activist César Chávez led his famous struggle to unionize Hispanic farmworkers in California and Florida, they marched under Mary's banner.

The New Testament provides scant historical information about Mary. Her birth, her death, her appearance, her age are never mentioned, and she speaks only four times. The first time is at the Annunciation, when, out of nowhere, Mary receives an angelic visitor who announces her wondrous blessedness. And we are told that Mary is 'greatly troubled' by this news – perhaps because she's a smart young woman and she knows that falling into the hands of the living God isn't necessarily going to be a bed of roses.

And the next thing Mary does is question Gabriel; she questions the great arch-angel. Gabriel tells her 'nothing is impossible with God', and Mary considers this. And the prospect of being ostracised from her local community by her unaccountable pregnancy appears to give her only a momentary pause before she decides, with enormous

courage, to take up the divine invitation to love.

What do we suppose that Gabriel showed Mary in that instant? A vision perhaps of the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God for humanity and of the eternal plan for the redemption of the world; of the unique role in salvation history to which Mary was being called - to be the human who gave birth to the Word of God and enabled the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

A vision which Mary shares with all of us when, immediately following on from this, she becomes the first messenger of the gospel – the first human being to take the good news of Jesus Christ to another, which she does by carrying Christ within herself to her relative Elizabeth. And at that moment, as the two pregnant women meet – carrying John the Baptist and Jesus in their wombs – Mary lifts up her soul in song and it is through the Song of Mary, the Magnificat, that the concerns of social justice burst into the Gospel: the lowly will be raised, the starving will be filled with good things, the proud will be scattered.

"The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn," preached Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 12 years before he was executed by the Nazis. "It is at once the most passionate, the

wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. It is a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”

Some historians have recorded that during the British rule of India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in church. And that in the 1980s, Guatemala’s government decided that Mary’s words about God’s preferential love for the poor were too dangerous, and they banned their public recitation. Similarly, that the military junta of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary’s song after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo – whose children had all been ‘disappeared’ during the Dirty War— printed the Magnificat’s words on posters throughout the capital plaza.

On the 21st February 2012, five young women entered the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. Removing their winter coats, the women put on colourful balaclavas, walked up the steps leading to the altar, and began to jump around, punching the air. After less than a minute, they were escorted outside the building by security guards. Film of the performance was later combined with footage shot at a different church to create a video clip for a song, which the women

described as a punk prayer. It borrowed its opening melody and refrain from Rachmaninoff’s Ave Maria, and the words went something like this:

‘O Virgin Mary, Mother of God, you are a feminist, come and drive Putin away. Look at all your faithful crawling to Putin the KGB man; they think he’s a saint. Meanwhile our freedom disappears and protestors are loaded into the prison van. The leader of the Orthodox Church believes in Putin. They both say to us, ‘Women, if you want to please the Lord, remember your place is under us, having sex and babies.’ The Holy Church pays homage to these degenerate bosses. The clergy love their money and riding in their black mafia limousines. The whole thing is a holy crap. Mother of God, you’re a feminist, come and help us. We know you’re with us in our protest. Holy Mary, drive Putin away, drive Putin away, drive Putin away.’

The performance was condemned as blasphemous by the Russian Orthodox Church and 3 members of the group were convicted of "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. The trial and sentence secured global notoriety for the all-female punk rock protest group known as Pussy Riot, who in their 21st-century punk prayer to the Mother of God, continue the long-

established tradition of Marian-inspired revolutionaries.

As we stand on the brink of the Winter Solstice and the longest night of the year, with many of us adjusting to the idea of a Tier 4 Christmas, let me leave you with some words that Our Lady spoke to Juan Diego in Guadalupe in 1531:

‘Hear me, my child: Let nothing discourage you, nothing depress you. Let nothing alter your heart or your countenance. Do not fear any illness, anxiety or pain. Am I not your mother? Are you not under the protection of my mantle? Am I not your fountain of life?’

And to six young people in Medjugorje, in the former Yugoslavia, who began having visions of Mary in the 1980s, she said:

‘Your responsibility is to accept Divine peace, to live it and to share it, not through words but through your life. People in distress and darkness come daily into your lives. Give them light and love! Act with love in the place where you live. Everything that you do, do with love – and you will discover God in everything, even in the smallest flower.’

Amen.