

The Fourth Sunday of Advent (falling on Christmas Eve)
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Lord Jesus, Light of the World, born in David's city of Bethlehem, born like him to be a king, be born in our hearts at Christmastide; be King of our lives today. Amen.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

'The King said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, the Ark of God stays in a tent"'. Words from our first reading, which is actually set every year for Holy Communion on Christmas Eve, and it just so happens that they are also set for the Fourth Sunday of Advent this year, so we got to hear them as a full congregation. Those verses from the second book of Samuel are set quite deliberately on Christmas Eve, to make it absolutely clear what sort of a Kingdom, and what sort of a King, we are awaiting. David is bothered because he has built a huge opulent house for himself, and the Ark of the Covenant is still living in the tent in which it has journeyed through the wilderness and arrived in the promised land. He thinks the Ark needs at least as nice a house as he lives in. And to start with, Nathan the prophet agrees. This sounds like a good plan. But then as he goes to sleep that night he has a dream - just like St Joseph, husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Nathan gets most of his stuff in dreams - and God says, you don't need to build me a house. I've been living in a tent ever since we left Egypt. And then probably the most important verse of our first

reading: 'I have been with you wherever you went.' I have been with you wherever you went.

Our God is mobile. Ours is a God who goes where we go, and actually the tent, the Tabernacle, that was dismantled and carried on the back of a camel or whatever, and then set up again wherever the Children of Israel stopped in the desert, is a great symbol of that mobility. Of the dynamism of our God.

It's very difficult to hear sections of this morning's first reading with the war in Gaza and Israel going on, because some of the lines in that reading do seem to promote the idea that the God of Israel is a geographical God, but those words to Nathan as he slept are a really important antidote to any of that type of thinking. God is not primarily a God of stone, and wood, and glass, as lovely as those things are. God is the God of the tent, the Tabernacle. And wherever we are, that is where God bangs in his tent pegs and sets up his guy ropes.

If you are here tonight for midnight, the service will end with the great Prologue from St John being read at the West doors, and of course that reading ends with verses that really underline the nature of the kingdom: 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. Not the Word became stone, or wood or glass. The Word became flesh. And there is a direct doctrinal link between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, because 2 Samuel is talking about a tent being where God lives, and the word that St John uses for 'dwelt' is the same as the word for 'tent': the Word pitched his tent among us. And then that reading tonight will go on to say we have seen his glory. And his glory was 'full of grace and truth'. And now I'm skating very close to preaching a Christmas sermon, but I'm not going to preach a Christmas sermon, but simply highlight another hard doctrinal connection

between tonight and this morning. The word was ‘full of grace’. Might that remind you of anyone we heard about this morning?

Well it should. Gabriel says to Mary, ‘Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.’ Slightly different words in our translation – greetings, favoured one - , but those are the older translation. And I just like to spend the remainder of our time this morning thinking about that greeting. It has passed into popular piety of course as the opening words of the Hail Mary, set by countless composers, normally in its Latin form, *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum*. Hail Mary, full of grace, Lord is with you.

Mary is to become the Tabernacle, the Ark of the covenant, the place where Christ will dwell physically for nine months. Where the Word, becoming flesh, will be fed, nurtured and protected. And if you want to know what the kingdom of God is: the kingdom of God is what happens where grace is. Where grace abounds, the kingdom grows. And Mary, who is destined to be the God-bearer, is therefore full of grace. And although Mary is of course special and distinct, nonetheless she is the model for all of us, because we too are those to whom the angel says, ‘the Lord be with you’: that greeting we use so frequently in church is simply the plural form of the greeting that Gabriel uses to Mary. And God longs for us, also, to be full of grace. Pius Parsch, in his wonderful book, *The Church’s Year of Grace*, says this:

‘At the words “the Lord be with you” [at every church service], we should think of the angel Gabriel’s words. May the Lord be with you as he was with Mary. Mary is our model of the divine indwelling through grace... The Christian must form the Son of God in themselves, and bring him to the world with Mary at Christmas.’

Isn’t that extraordinary. The Christian, you, I, must form the Son of God in ourselves, and bring him to the world at Christmas.

How can we do that? Only by grace. Where grace is, there is the kingdom of God. And God longs fill you with his grace. Not in exactly the same way as Mary of course, she alone was the God bearer. She alone, distinctly and wonderfully, physically nurtured the Word made Flesh for nine months. But we were reminded earlier that God can pitch his tent anywhere, and where he longs to pitch his tent the most is in your heart. In in your soul.

So he comes to us. There will be lots of talk about the first coming over the next twenty-four hours of course. And we have spent some time through November in particular thinking about what is often known as the ‘second coming’, what will happen at the end of time. But actually of course there are at least three comings, because God comes to us now. In our prayers, through the Scripture, in the mercy of a friend, and most especially in the holy Sacrament of the altar. That’s the extraordinary mystery of Advent. God came to us *then*, he will come again at the *end*, but in his longing to know our hearts, he also comes to us *now*. And he does so with a greeting and a promise, which echo the greeting and the promise of Gabriel to Mary: ‘Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you’. Mary becomes our pattern for self-surrender, as she responds, ‘be it unto me according to your word.’ Which is Bible language for ‘yes’! Yes.

What is about to happen at the altar is a pitching of the tent, yes briefly in a geographical place on the surface of this particular Table, but only because the grace then moves, by your act of self-surrender in holding out your hands, into your heart, your soul, and, like Mary, if we dare to say ‘yes’, he will Tabernacle

with us. In us. We can begin to become, if not yet *full* of grace like Mary, at least places where grace can dwell.

Isaac of Stella, the great Cistercian abbot, described the way which grace comes into the world in these words: 'all of this holds for the church generally, for Mary in a special way, and for each faithful soul individually.'

Hail Mary, full of grace, Lord is with you. When the church, in greeting, says 'the Lord be with you' - which I am going to do a few more times than normal today just to drill the point home - there is an echo back to Gabriel and Mary. Like Mary, we can be a place where the Lord is. And though not yet full of grace like Mary, there is nonetheless real grace offered to you, offered to me, grace to become a tent and a Tabernacle where the Lord dwells. Mary's 'yes' gifts us, if we can just hold out our hands, the possibility of saying yes also, of believing that the Lord is with us, that there is grace waiting for us, that the angel has something to say to us as well.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.