

Advent 4 B St Stephen 9.30. Luke 1: 26-38
20.12.20.

“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (v37)

A gunnery officer was overseeing the firing of his gun at a target some miles way over a hill. A senior officer came up to see how things were going. On enquiring of his junior, he received the reply: “I don’t know what effect we’re having on the enemy, Sir, but they’re leaving here with a big bang.”

Preaching is often criticised as being a waste of time; and if one wanted to communicate with people there are far better ways of doing so. Those critics make a huge error because they leave out the work of the Holy Spirit – the most important part of the equation. “Where two or three are gathered together, there am I in their midst” said Jesus. The words I speak may sound pedestrian to you, uninteresting to the person next to you, but to the person behind you they may bring a blinding revelation, or comfort, or disturb his or her complacency. I have no way of telling. All I can do is see that they leave here with as big a bang as possible!

Whether the words I speak are pedestrian or words of life depends upon you as much as upon me. If you are receptive, open to hear what is being said, ready to engage with it, then the Holy Spirit can take

my poor words and make them words of life for you. You may remember a couple of weeks ago I spoke of my visiting a widow for the funeral of her husband, and my words were totally inadequate, yet the Holy Spirit made them for her words of comfort. If you switch off, then my words are no better than blank shells.

Today we remember the Annunciation of the BVM recalling when Gabriel visited Mary, asking here to respond to God's call. What went through her mind as she grasped what Gabriel was asking of her in God's name? To have a child out of wedlock brought shame on her family, so how could she live in the community? Here we should mark the courage and steadfast love of Joseph who made her offering possible. When Gabriel asked her the question and once Mary had grasped what it meant, time must have stood still, for the incarnation of Jesus depended on her answer. No wonder she was greatly troubled.

If you've visited Florence and been round the art galleries, you can't have failed to notice the endless paintings of the Annunciation, which show Mary and Gabriel. In many, Mary looks rather passive, but a painting by Simone Martini in the Uffizi Gallery captures Mary's trouble mind. She is turning her body away from Gabriel, grasping her cloak around her neck as though she wishes to hide from him; yet she agrees to his request.

A great amount of ink has been spilt over the Virgin Birth and for many it is one of the principle beliefs of our faith; yet many question it. If you only had the gospels of Mark and John, you would know nothing of the VB, yet still be wholly Christian.

Oliver Quick in his book *Doctrines of the Creed* says that “we ought to be tender and sympathetic towards the convictions of those who differ from ourselves.” Furthermore, a close reading of Luke throws up some interesting questions as they link Jesus to King David through Joseph not Mary.

Whatever your feelings about this teaching, I hope that we can all agree on one thing, that however God the Father brought about the birth of Jesus, that he was intimately involved for the salvation of humanity. I’m afraid that it’s a failing in us that we want to define things far too closely. We see this in the teaching about the VB, and also in that around the nature of the consecrated bread and wine at Holy Communion. How can we understand the way God works, or why he does so in particular ways? Elizabeth I summed up our proper attitude in the words: “That which God doth make it, that do I believe and take it.”

There are two sorts of obedience - the obeying of orders or from fear on the one hand, and from love on the other, which is feely and willingly given. We see two accounts of the latter in the gospel - one was Mary’s submission; the other was Jesus in

the garden of Gesemane - "Yet not my will but yours be done."

Our obedience is a response to love and expresses how we understand our relationship to God. This obedience does not depend on how we feel, but on the will. Too much today depends on feelings to guide actions and judgements and so provide no foundation for life rather, all too often, this destabilises society and which lies behind much that passes for political correctness.

As we come shortly to celebrate the birth of Jesus, it was Mary's obedience and leap of faith which made it possible. So, today, we are to pray for our community and our world, and at the same to be prepared to offer our obedience to God, however unlikely God's call to us might appear.

If I may end on a personal note. When I left school I went to work in industry at Avonmouth, Bristol. During the five years I was there, the feeling was growing that I ought to be ordained, a feeling which I resisted manfully. However, the urge persisted, so in the end I went to see my Vicar, whose response was: "I've been expecting you for some time!" I was passed on to the Diocesan authorities and the upshot was that I was selected for training for the ministry. I tried Queen's College, Birmingham first and the principal couldn't take me that year so suggested I went to St John's, Durham. Again, there was no place that year, so it looked as though I'd have

to wait a year. Then, out of the blue, I asked if I could read for a degree instead of going straight in to ordination training? I could, got a grant from Bristol, read for an honours degree in Psychology, which I hadn't planned, then did theology, met Elisabeth, got married, then ordained, and by a tortuous route, arrived here today!

My "yes" to God was not anything as important as Mary's, and yours won't be either. But God does call each one of us and waits for our response. Mary made that leap of faith - what about us? "Behold," said Mary, "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."