

I am finding it hard to believe that we have already reached the 4th Sunday of Advent. I love this season but this year it has been a little surreal. I was saying to the congregation on Thursday that having no voice for much of Advent has been challenging, though I have learnt a great deal. Our society relies so much on each of us being heard – but that is not always possible... (I'll come back to this thought a little later). But one of the things I love about Advent is singing carols, and even now that my voice is recovering, I won't be able to sing for some time – so Advent has felt a little strange.

It is also my first Advent in Australia for over 22 years, and it just feels weird in the heat and sunshine, after embracing Advents in the darkness with lights being needed most of the time. In many ways all these challenges have been a gift to reflect on Advent's meaning.

I was re-reading an article this week that suggested that we should endeavour to always be an Advent people. Theologian Karoline Lewis¹ article said that she liked the idea of Advent as a way of life, a way of life that seems to resonate with the meaning of

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3462>

incarnation. For Karoline reflected that in Advent (in the coming of the Christ child) we see, we regard, we are perplexed, we question, and we commit to God. In a sense this season sums up the essence of our faith. It is no accident then, that the figure we consider on this last Sunday of Advent is Mary.

Mary is a model, an example, a witness, a sister who voices for us a pattern of Christmas expectancy and Christmas response. She embodies all the Advent and Christmas feelings, the questions, and ponderings, not only during Advent, but also in our post-Christmas reality. She is not just a simple girl who said yes – her life of faith, like ours, has much more depth than that.

The challenge of the lectionary however is that in Year A – this year, we hear the account of the Mary on the last Sunday of Advent from Matthew's Gospel – and Matthew does not really give a voice to Mary. Unlike the writer of Luke's Gospel (as we heard last week) who focuses on the roles of Mary and Elizabeth; Matthew's birth narrative is not only short, but from the perspective of Joseph.

Matthew takes great care to establish early on, not only who Jesus is, but why he is important. Matthew spells out that the prophetic text that Jesus fulfils is Isaiah 7:14. Matthew's emphasis on Jesus as Emmanuel². God with us!

Matthew at first glance seems to almost ignore the role of Mary, and yet we almost learn as much from what is hidden behind the text.

For obvious reasons, I have been reflecting a lot this Advent about figures in the narratives of the Gospels that do not seem to have a voice – and how Jesus brings one.

Voice is not about words – it is also about being seen as much as it is about being heard. One of the things I realised while I had laryngitis is how much of the world is hard to navigate if you can't be heard.

From getting attention a shop, to asking for help, to even the way people engage with you. Oddly many people stopped talking to me, when I couldn't talk to them – thank goodness for text!

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4323

The narrative in Matthews Gospel, while maybe ignoring some voices, does focus on the faithfulness of God – and the faithfulness of those who have courage to trust in God.

Joseph is a righteous man whom Matthew presents as presuming Mary to be unfaithful when he finds her to be pregnant. But a dream sets him straight and he obediently takes Mary as his wife and serves as Jesus' legal father and faithfully names the child in accordance with God's will³.

But behind these facts would have been a level of heartache – no matter how faithful Mary and Joseph were. In the first century to be betrothed was a legal contract, binding in every respect. To be engaged was essentially to be married yet not consummated. Which means that when Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant, he can only conclude that she has been unfaithful to him and so likely experiences the pain, anguish, and maybe even a sense of betrayal.

If Joseph is suffering, it's hard to even imagine Mary's anxiety. Because Matthew narrates his account of the nativity from the point of view of Joseph, we get very little insight into Mary. But she will know the pain

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4323

her pregnancy caused her family and Joseph. We don't really know what happened but given the visit from an angel to calm all this down and orient Joseph to God's intentions – it is likely that it was not calm sailing. Angels usually get involved in the biblical stories when things are complicated, so it is pretty safe to say that the months leading up to Christ's birth was not one blissful baby-shower after another but were fraught with anxiety and concern and waves of emotion we have all experienced at various times⁴.

Matthew story doesn't see the Holy Family getting it all perfect – rather we get a hint at the stress that a young family in their situation might experience.

Not unlike Advent, we can be so focused on the perfect 'Christmas' (whatever that is) we miss the underlying emotion and story of the narrative. The birth of Jesus in Matthew sums up much human emotion and anxiety when things do not play out as we might expect. There is much upheaval in the start of Jesus earthly life.

And I hope that this reminder might be the gift. If we expect Advent and Christmas to be

⁴ <https://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-4-a-god-really-with-us/>

perfect, all angelic and neat – maybe we need to remember that the birth of Jesus was not. Yet within Matthew’s birth narrative is a promise - “Emmanuel” given by the prophet Isaiah. The promise that Jesus is “God with us.” That is, God coming to be with us as we are. Not as we know we should be, or are trying to be, or have promised to be, or will be some day, but with us as we are now...today...in this moment.

So as we come to the last Sunday of Advent, and consider how we might follow Mary’s example, maybe we can take the time to consider the role of Mary in all its fullness. Perhaps the promise at the heart of this passage from Matthew is that as God came to be with Mary and Joseph and use them as they were, in the place they found themselves. God comes to us in Christ to be with us, as we are, where we are!

Mary and Joseph chose to embrace God. A God who moved them well outside their comfort zones, who challenged them, who caused them to question, and who met them as they were. I wonder if we might find the courage to embrace God in the same way.
Amen