

Advent 4. St Thomas on the Bourne. 22 12. 19

This parish of St Thomas on the Bourne has a great reputation of doing things really well especially when it comes to liturgy, arranging services and keeping up traditions. However, on the 4th Sunday of Advent I still find two things puzzling. First why is the fourth candle on the Advent ring pink and secondly why is there one and only red bauble on the Christmas tree when all the others are silver.?

Well of course you will tell me that the 4th candle is pink because today the 4th Sunday of Advent we are celebrating the Blessed Virgin Mary - yes, I get that, but why pink surely the colour should be blue. Mary is always clad in blue - Look at any painting or stained glass window - Mary always in blue. And what about the red bauble? Well I've learnt that it's there because it reminds us of an important truth - only God is perfect and however beautifully the tree is decorated, we need to be reminded that only God is beyond our attempts at perfection, only God is perfect. The one red bauble reminds us of that. It's a great tradition and one that comes from our Muslim brother and sisters. Which brings me back to Mary.

Neil Fairlamb the Vicar of Tilford has developed a very good relationship with the Ahmadi Muslim community

who as you know have their HQ here at Tilford. Their leader the 5th Caliph Mirza Masoor Ahmad is the spiritual leader of the Ahmadis who number some 20 m. worldwide. And have followers in 200 countries. And their HQ is just down the road in Tilford. How amazing is that!

Neil told me that the Caliph who was talking to him last week had offered to come and talk to the local churches about Mary. Muslims have a great love and respect for Mary. In fact, the Caliph said with a wry smile that Mary was mentioned 35 times in the Koran whereas Mohammed was only mentioned 5 times! . It seems that Mary who is given the title by us Christians as the Theotokos -The God Bearer is honoured as much if not more by Muslims than by some Christians - food for thought .

The problem is we sentimentalise Mary. We put her in stained glass windows and statues . in Holy Week when Angela and I were in Southern Spain I we saw many Mary statues some at least 12foot high being carried through the streets on huge floats supported by 50 or so tough men and some tough women. All these traditions are great as far as they go but they can miss the point of who Mary really was and how we might relate to her. I remember when I was curates in

East London my boss who was the Area Dean was having a conversation with a particularly difficult troublesome parish priest. The conversation went like this. “How are you Father I’m sorry to see you have broken your arm.” Yes, said the difficult priest. “I am very cross with Our Lady (the BVM)” “Oh dear how come?” “Well I was on a ladder last week cleaning Our Lady when I slipped and fell off - I’m extremely cross with Our Lady” “Oh, dear said my boss. Had you thought Father that Our Lady might be very cross with you.!”

It seems to me that we should think of Mary not as a worker of miracles or as a sort of divine protector but as the one who said Yes to God. A young girl who was homeless refugee in an occupied country who found herself to be pregnant. How utterly amazing that God should chose this girl to be the mother of the Messiah the Saviour of the human race and that Joseph should be his earthly father.

But to return to today’s Gospel reading. from St Matthew Chapter 1. Matthew is more interested in the identity of the one being born rather than the story of the actual birth. Today’s gospel tells us more about Joseph and his dream. It is not until the last verse of the chapter that the birth is recorded.

“When Joseph awoke out of sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

Matthew wants us to understand the significance of this birth, that is why the first half of the chapter list the family tree of Joseph going right back to Abraham through 14 generations to King David another 14 generations through to the time that the Jews were exiled in Babylon through to another 14 generations to the time of Joseph who was engaged to Mary who was with child Jesus the Messiah. This child was of Divine origin. He is the one who will save ho will save people from their sins. He will be known as Emmanuel “God is with us “

That phrase “God is with us” highlights the graciousness of God who comes to us in a down the earth, very matter of fact way. “Mary bore a Son The divine and the human coming together in the womb of Mary

“God with Us” giving us that love and peace which the world cannot give. in our day to day worries in kindnesses, when we give or when we receive in the

light and in the darkness in life and in death, God with Us” Or as some commentators rephrase the words With US is God.

With US in our broken and suffering world with US in our faltering believe, in our stumblings - with US in the complexity our lives. This is what Jesus did in his life - he shared it with us. And through the Spirit of God he shares and continues to be with us today.

Our God is a God of surprises. How surprising that God was active through all those extraordinary characters who are listed in the first half of Matthew Chapter 1. All 42 of them were very human and some very unorthodox characters these were the ancestors of Joseph the husband of Mary the bearer of God’s Son. God’s mission was furthered and sometimes thwarted by the lives politics and history of these men & women.

But ultimately the human and the divine came together when Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded. He took Mary as his wife and Mary bore a Son and named him Jesus. Emmanuel. “God with US”

The trick is to learn to be like Joseph to be alert to listen and to aware to what God might be doing and saying to US and then if we respond who knows what might happen.