

Sermon for Advent 4 (20th December 2009)

“In those days, Mary set out.”

On this day, our Mary is setting out to go to her new place in the West Downland benefice, and to be part of God’s people there. And, although her last service is this evening and we will say our formal farewells there, I wanted to say something this morning to express our gratitude to you Mary we say goodbye and wish you well. Saying goodbye is never an easy thing to do, whatever the circumstances, but Mary tells me that she’s well used to moving house, after her many years in the army. I’m not sure how she feels today, having moved house on Friday, but when I spoke to her on Thursday to check how things were going she assured me that all was well and that she was keeping her bed and the gin bottle until the following morning. Anyway, she’s made it this far and is still looking remarkably good on it, so that’s encouraging.

Of course, moving on is nothing new for God’s people. Our whole story is intertwined with God’s own story of new life and transformation. Throughout time, God’s people have set out in faith when God has called them to a new place or a new experience, and in our own part of that story we too are called by God to new places, new structures, new ways of being God’s people in our own time. For Mary, God is calling her to minister and witness to him among a new group of people, and, although we shall miss her, we support her in this new step of faith.

Our gospel reading today speaks of the other Mary, might I say, the more famous Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was also called to set out on a journey of faith. For the other Mary her journey was to new places and new experiences. When she heard that she would be Jesus’ mother, the gospel tells us she was shocked, she could never have expected this future for herself. But she accepted God’s will for her life and followed joyfully.

Her journey took her first to her cousin Elizabeth, the one who would most closely understand what Mary was experiencing because she was experiencing much the same thing in her own life. Elizabeth, who was old and had been barren, was also now to give birth. Her son would be the prophet John, the successor to the great prophet Elijah, and he would be the one to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. Mary’s journey went on from this shared experience, this confirmation and affirmation of her destiny, and it took her to Bethlehem, far from her home, at a busy time, to be registered for the census with Joseph to whom she was engaged. It took her to a cold, dark stable (or more likely a cave) to give birth to her first son; to Egypt as a refugee, fleeing persecution in a desperate attempt to protect her child.

From there back home to Nazareth to a time of growing and nurturing; on to Jerusalem where she almost lost her 12-year-old son and began to realise that his destiny would bring her pain and anguish and perhaps remembered the words of old Simeon 12 years before at the Temple: “a sword will pierce your own soul”. From Jerusalem back to Nazareth where Mary helped Jesus to grow in wisdom and in favour with God and men. Then Mary followed her son into an itinerant

ministry, as he brought word of God's love and power to God's people; and on to the cross to see her child suffer and die at the hands of those who would not accept God's Messiah; to resurrection day and the joy of knowing that all that had been said of her son was true; and on to a central place within the life of the early church. What a journey that Mary had, through joys and sorrows, but always walking faithfully with God.

What about the journey of our Mary? I know a little of it, some of you know much more. It's not been without its challenges, or its joys. Her journey to ordination was long – through teaching, the army, the guides and much more; from Tilehurst, to many places across the world during her career in the army, and back to Tilehurst and to us at Burghfield where she has shared in the witness and work of this church. She has made many friends here; she has given us much by her ministry here, and we are grateful for all she has done for us and all she has taught us. It's been quite a journey for our Mary too. And now God is calling her to a new place, to new people, because he has new work for her to do.

This is the call to all faithful people, into transformation and new life. But sometimes we are courageous enough to follow. When we do have the grace to follow, God blesses us richly and accomplishes his work in us.

Someone once said: God comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable. And sometimes it is that disturbance of our comfort that is God's nudging that he's calling us on to something or somewhere new. It comes to us all at some time or another in our lives, but we don't always listen to it. It's much more comfortable to stay within our comfort zone. But Mary and I have both experienced that insistent nudging that comes to so many who are ordained when God just won't leave you alone until you say yes to his will in your life.

For Mary and us, our paths after today go in different directions, but always towards the same destination, always on God's way for us. And we are thankful that part of our journey has been together.

We pray that our Mary's journey is not as traumatic but just as blessed as the journey of the other Mary. And, this advent, I pray that our journey as we come closer to the joy of Christmas might be blessed too. That we may all hear and receive God's call, in whatever way it may come to us. That we may have the courage and grace to follow into new experiences, new challenges and new fulfillment as we walk with God.

Mary, thank you for all your hard work here and we pray God's blessing on you for your onward journey. As it was said of the other Mary, so may it be said of you "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Blessings
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