

## **Some reflections on the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent**

*This Sunday we are reminded that our world is full of ordinary people living in obscure places but who nevertheless have changed the course of history. In the story of the Church, the first person coming from such a humble background and circumstances is Mary. By her 'Yes' to God, her 'Here I am, let it be to me as you have said,' God gave to her and to us Jesus, the Son of God, the Word of God made flesh, not so much for us to be amazed by, not so much to be an object of devotion, but most of all, as an example for us to copy. The life and ministry of Jesus was also a 'here I am, I come to do your will,' and with the intention that we would respond to God in the same way. With a heart-filled commitment to living by the will of God and the example of Jesus, and with the openness which Mary showed which enabled her by the grace of God to bring Jesus to the world, we too can participate with God in changing the course of the world today, a world that so much needs to be changed.*

### **Micah 5: 2 – 5a**

'Long ago prophets knew Christ would come, born a Jew,' we shall sing on Sunday.' To this traditional interpretation of the message of the prophets, we must reply, 'Well, not exactly!' The prophets did speak of a Messiah, a king from the line of David who would shepherd the people Israel, defend them from their enemies and bring them peace. Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos and Hosea (from 740BC) writes of this king as being born in Bethlehem, David's town. But no Hebrew king ever managed to reveal the identity and role of the Messiah of prophetic hope. Then, hundreds of years after Micah, when Israel was again in dire straits, Jesus appeared. Although he was inspired by the great prophets, his impact was unique and unexpected. Only after his time on earth would the conviction have arisen that he was the Messiah of Jewish and prophetic hope. The first Christians, being Jews, would naturally interpret Jesus from their own tradition and show him as its fulfilment (see Matthew 2: 6). In fact, what he turned out to be was someone who far exceeded any figure that the ancient prophets had longed for. As C. S. Lewis beautifully put it, 'Once in our world there was a stable which had something in it which was larger than the whole world.' (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*)

### **Psalm 80**

This psalm appears to be a plea from citizens of the northern kingdom living in Jerusalem following the conquest of their homeland by Assyria (721BC). It calls on God from his throne in Jerusalem to restore the northern tribes (Joseph, Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh). The imagery of God is as a shepherd who looks after his people.

### **Hebrews 10: 5 – 10**

This letter always needs to be read with its first readers in mind, most likely Jews who had become Christians but were missing the ritual and sacrifices of their Jewish worship tradition. The words attributed to Christ by the author are actually from Psalm 40: 7 – 9. That psalm declares that God prefers obedience to sacrifices. Jesus' obedience was expressed supremely by the willing offering up of himself to death on a cross. His self-offering replaces once and for all the now ineffective sacrifices of the Old Testament.

### **Luke 1: 39 – 45**

The 'Visitation' of Mary to her relative Elizabeth. This is not to be read simply as a sentimental story about a meeting of two expectant mothers. It is a theological reflection in which Luke sets out his vision for the beginning of the Christian mission. Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit and is to be the Christ-bearer. She goes off in haste to share her news which is received with joy. Elizabeth too on receiving her is filled with the Spirit and praises God that the mother of her Lord has come to her, and her own unborn child, John, also leaps for joy in her womb in recognition of the Christ who is present in Mary. This story looks forward to Pentecost, the account of Mary and the disciples being filled with the Spirit in order to proclaim the liberating good news of Christ. Christians, like Mary, are to be those who have responded willingly to the call of God and have been filled with the Spirit of God to enable them to be Christ-bearers to the world, those who show most of all that God is with us.

A prayer for this Sunday:

*God our Father, as we eagerly await the deeper coming of your Son among us, prepare us to recognize and to welcome him when he comes in his own unique and surprising ways. When we look for him to come with great power and glory, he comes in poverty and humility; when we look for him in rituals, shrines and beautiful cathedrals, we often find he is standing by our side; when we wait for extraordinary signs, we discover him in the simplicity of everyday life and people. We ask you to accustom us to Jesus and his ways that he may change our lives to conform to his. May we grow more and more to reflect his presence and love in our lives so that the world may know that they have a friend and saviour, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*