

4th Sunday of Advent (19th December 2021)

Sermon by Jane Brough

Christmas is almost here, yet again. Throughout Advent we've been waiting, busy with our practical preparations and (hopefully) escaping the busyness occasionally, to make our spiritual ones. And on Saturday the great day will dawn. For some this particular Christmas will be even more special than usual. For expectant parents the waiting lasts nine months and some babies will be born on Saturday, Christmas Day itself.

Next week our local papers and news reports may carry photographs of babies born on Christmas Day, with the caption "Christmas Deliveries!" Editors love words with several meanings because puns make good headlines. Babies are delivered- but so are parcels. Online companies urge us to shop early, in time for Christmas delivery, with luck, all those promised orders have nearly been fulfilled and we need only wait for Christmas morning.

But Christmas heralds another delivery, too, our delivery from sin and death, through the life, death and resurrection of a baby born in a stable. Delivery can also mean rescue, liberation. Although the delivery of a Christmas parcel marks the end of excited waiting, it's the start of a new period, of learning how to play with a longed for toy or game or use that new phone or power drill, perhaps! And while the delivery of a baby marks the end of pregnancy, its hopes and expectations, all its promise and potential. In the same way, Christmas marks the end of one period of waiting, but the start of another, waiting for God's promises to be completely fulfilled Jesus is both the fulfilment and the promise.

In our first reading from Micah, the prophet speaks of a time in the future when a leader of Israel will emerge from Bethlehem "Whose origin is of old, from ancient days" (from the family line of David) Small places often produce great people and a great King and Shepherd is promised from insignificant little Bethlehem. There God will join his people and the future will be secure. He will bring peace, Micah says, because he is peace. Out of humble Bethlehem will come a ruler who will shepherd his people Israel.

In our Gospel reading, two women await delivery. Eventually both will give birth, but each is aware of another kind of delivery, too. Each knows about God's promises of salvation, and each believes in the fulfilment of these promises. Running through Luke's Gospel like a golden thread is the idea of a plan of salvation, a promise that began before the birth of Jesus. It's there in the Hebrew scriptures and the history of God's people, Israel. God promised to step into this World to save us, to establish a Kingdom of peace and Justice, and to provide a way back to him, When Mary sang God's praise in the hymn we call the Magnificat, she clearly knew her scripture. Hear the Old Testament echoes as she recalls God's promise of mercy, not only to previous generations but to future ones, not only to Abraham but to his spiritual descendants forever!

Both women have allowed God's spirit to enter their lives. Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit and Elizabeth too, now filled with the spirit they can recognise God's work and rejoice. Their unborn children assume their roles, as from the very womb John the Baptist recognises the one whose way he is to prepare, the one who will lay down his life for us, but rise again and release the spirit to work in all our lives, the one who will bring us to eternal life.

When Elizabeth joyfully hails Mary "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord!" She could be referring to herself as well, and every "she" (and every "he") today who believes that God will keep his promise. We too, are called to believe. We too are called to allow the Holy Spirit, to work in us. We too are called to serve.

The waiting for Christmas is very nearly over for another year (just a few more fraught days) then the presents will be under the tree or waiting in Santa's sleigh for delivery over Friday night. For some new parents the waiting is nearly too, the babies to be born on Saturday are almost ready to enter this life. But the waiting for the Lord goes on, for the moment.

And as we wait, we learn more about what God wants of us. We study God's word, as Mary and Elizabeth did. We offer ourselves as God's servants, as they did, prepared to do God's will in order to help the promise be fulfilled. With the Spirit's help we can work towards a better world, where the hungry are filled with good things, where peace and justice prevail.

Jesus is the fulfilment and the promise. As we look for his coming in glory let us seek to recapture some of the joyful anticipation of pregnancy, the excitement of Christmas and multiply it a hundredfold. This delivery isn't just for Christmas, it's for eternal life!