

Sermon 24.12.23

Advent 4

By Joy Dipple

Romans 16:25-27 Luke 1:26-3

Mess, mystery and miracles – 3 Ms I want to talk about on this Advent 4 Sunday, which this year is also of course Christmas Eve. On previous years we have had a quiet Christmas service on the Sunday afternoon before Christmas, but with the clash of dates we haven't been able to do that this year. However, we still need to be mindful of those who struggle with the exuberance of Christmas for whatever reason.

I'm aware that many people we know have suffered bereavement, severe illness and other difficulties this year. It is also a time when people feel short of money and are stressed about all that has to be done.

The world may be a beautiful place, but it is also a messy world, and in addition to personal worries, the news coverage has highlighted dreadful conflicts going on in other countries, particularly in Ukraine and the Holy Land.

Some people may regard Christianity as a means of escape; the Nativity story itself sounds like a wonderful fairy story; but actually God is very much aware of the reality of our messy world, and it is the reason why he came in human form to be amongst us, and to point towards the love and hope we need. He was, and still is, fully immersed in the suffering of the world. Jesus himself was born in a messy stable, not a royal palace, and he would indeed suffer greatly in his death on the Cross.

God loves each one of us with an intense love, but having given us the gift of free will, he was never under any illusion about the state of our world. From before our creation he knew the world would be messy and painful, but he had a solution in Christ that was there before we were.

We now come on to the second M: mystery. In our first reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of the mystery of the Gospel message. As said, God's purpose was there before creation, and it permeates our whole Bible from beginning to end. The Old Testament has a great depth to it as it speaks of the messianic hope. Paul speaks of that hope having been hidden as a mystery throughout scripture, but which is now revealed in Christ. The mystery was part of the history of the Jewish people. It would be played out in that nation, but it wouldn't stop with them. God wasn't just the God of the Jewish people. Their

role was to take the Gospel message out to the rest of the world. Today there are many messianic Jews who recognise Jesus as their saviour, but they are still a minority. However, it was from that nation that the revealed mystery of the Gospel message spread out into the Gentile world, and it was Paul who was the major player. He recognised that Jesus was for all people, and we are here in this church today because of the Gentiles being given that message, particularly as the Romans took on board the Christian faith. Into a messy world came the revealed mystery of Jesus as the Messiah.

Now we come to the third M: miracles. The angel Gabriel visited Mary to announce the miracle that, despite being a virgin, Mary would become pregnant with the Son of God. Tonight we begin the celebration of his birth and it is a time to party, as we ponder on the fact that the one who created the whole world came in human form to live amongst his creation, out of his great love for us.

Jesus would demonstrate the power of God's kingdom in miracles or signs of that kingdom, but we can never predict his actions in our lives. Many would be healed, but many still lived with their problems; and we can probably all think of people we know whose Christian faith still shines through them, despite their own difficult circumstances. They can be powerful witnesses of God's kingdom. We must never limit our expectations of what God can do, but he knows better than us the best answers to our prayers. Yes, he performs miracles, but it is our reconciliation into God's kingdom that is his main purpose. He could have miraculously saved himself from the Cross, but he endured it for the sake of the kingdom. His disciples were also given God's power to miraculously demonstrate the presence of God's kingdom, but they were also persecuted and experienced horrendous deaths. Jesus wasn't just a miracle worker; he was more than that.

The messianic mystery that permeated Old Testament scripture, was finally revealed in Jesus Christ – the one who would enter our messy world and reconcile both Jew and Gentile into God's kingdom. That is the greatest miracle of all – that all followers of Christ have, by God's grace, been given free access into his kingdom.

Thanks be to God for the willingness of Christ to enter our world and become our saviour. Amen