

Mary was suddenly visited by a messenger from God; an angel; the angel Gabriel. An encounter that was a truly life changing moment. If she rose to the challenge and accepted, she was going to bear God's son.

No wonder Mary was shocked and confused "How can this be?" but why did she feel so happy and excited after that initial shock, rather than panicky and overwhelmed with anxiety? Maybe it shows that God was truly speaking to her and guiding her, rather than some wild notion of fame that she had dreamt up herself. Following God often brings a strange feeling of joy and empowerment that doesn't seem fit our human story at the time.. Think also of the phrase "truth is stranger than fiction" - God's truth is sometimes something we mere mortals could never have even dreamt of.

People seriously ill can suddenly feel moments of peace when they have encountered God through a prayer of desperation, a plea for help or courage, either by themselves or others praying for them. And they have said " I knew you were praying for me at that moment and I felt a huge sense of peace."

Today, many people plunged into Tier 4 restrictions today will be feeling similar feelings of panic, devastation, their world turned upside down and of feeling cast aside, rudderless, in the stormy sea of the COVID pandemic. But, the one constant in all this is GOD, and his enduring unchanging love for us which he is never going to throw to the winds or put restrictions on.

We are approaching Christmas - the celebration of Jesus , which means "Saviour" , coming into our world . Christ - the Anointed One of God - coming once again into the forefront of our minds and our hearts, into our personal and global worlds of despair and pain and disappointment. But through turning to Christ we can find chinks of light in the Tier 4 restrictions : give thanks that worship is still allowed to go on- a recognition that celebrating the birth of our Saviour can transform and transcend our earthly lives and bring us moments of peace as we connect with God. And give thanks for community - and for technology to link us with video calls and phone conversations , which do bring us the social interaction with each other that we humans need in order to thrive.

How many of us will actually be totally isolated on Christmas Day in this country?
There will be many but I doubt whether that includes people like you and me.

How many of us in this country will be yearning for a big Christmas party, consuming huge amounts of rich food and alcohol, a chance to go wild because we deserve it after all this year of worry and change and disruption?

Is the challenging message from God to His people a new way of living , a new way of looking at our lives , a new way of loving one another - truly trying to put others first as Jesus did?

Is that his plan for you and for me? It's a hard message to hear but we can face it together as Christians , and as part of a church community because we have a God who will be with us through the dark times and rejoice with us in the glimpses of joy we experience, often in such small things we can so easily miss - the shared laughter with friends, the understanding nod or smile, the few moments chat that bring us out of a downward spiral of gloom.

Mary faced huge challenges in accepting God's plan for her - the stomach churning fear of having to tell someone you love (in her case her husband to be Joseph) news that you know

that may spark anger, desolation and even an end to a relationship. But she trusted God, she gave herself totally over to him and it worked out - God was with her , as he can be with us in difficult situations if we pause, pray for the Holy Spirit to give us the right words- try it, it does actually seem to help.

- God helped Joseph understand that Mary hadn't been unfaithful to him, but that she had accepted and embraced God's huge and life-changing plan for her- she didn't know how it was all going to happen scientifically but that was not the issue here, miracles happen - we all know of smaller miracles of health recovery or an unexpected change of heart against all the odds, or of scientists discovering vaccines, treatments and cures for deadly diseases.

Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night suddenly realising the answer to a problem that had been niggling at you? Maybe that is God's messenger speaking to you? His Holy Spirit opening up your mind to God's help? Or does this happen when you have sat down quietly on your own, no television or radio background noise, the exception being music uninterrupted by jingles and adverts , or taken a walk or pottered in the garden or your house - times when we can be open to God without the clutter of our busy minds or the human generated noise around us.

Our plans and ideas don't always match with God's and we have to have the humility to accept that we often don't get it right. Our headstrong ideas have to be reigned in, prayed about and perhaps adapted or perhaps carried out when we are more certain they are God's plan and not our own.

In our Old Testament reading, David desperately wanted to build a permanent home for God but God said no, I want your son Solomon to do that. Perhaps he still had other plans for David, perhaps he knew one of David's weaknesses was pride....and he wasn't going to let him revel in building a very important building - outwardly to honour God , but I wonder how much was to honour his own name?

David was a rather headstrong character and didn't always listen to God and could easily have gone ahead with building a temple but he didn't, he did listen to God and was humble enough to accept God had other plans for his life, and the time was not yet right for a temple to be built to the Lord.

David accepted God's plan for his life at that moment

Mary accepted God's plan for her life

David was the ancestor of Joseph who became Mary's husband. Mary bore God's Son , Jesus Christ. Looking back we can see the links , we can see God's plan to save his creation, all through the Old Testament, culminating in sending his Son Jesus (Saviour)Christ (the Anointed One) to redeem us and the world.

God still has a plan to save His world and as Christians we are called to be messengers and channels for God's plan to come about - too often we don't see our part in it or have the courage to follow Christ and not our own thinking.

Now, today, in Tier 4 and in the coming weeks, we have the opportunity to show God's love, follow a difficult path with personal restrictions so that we can love and protect our neighbour , to be part of God's plan and to rejoice in Jesus and to let Him transform our lives and for us to show His light in the world.

Amen

Katrina Nice, 20.12.20