

## **Embracing Our Humanity: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021 (The Fourth Sunday of Advent)**

*Readings – Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45*

*“...as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy.”*

If you're interested in some intelligent listening, may I commend this year's Reith Lectures on Radio 4? They are being given by Professor Stuart Russell, a British academic who works on Artificial Intelligence at the University of California. Don't worry, you don't need to be a computer whizz to understand them – Professor Russell is very good at explaining his subject in terms understandable to an intelligent non-specialist audience.

We have now lived through half a century where ever increasing computer power has radically transformed the way in which we live. The growing power of computers and the consequent disruption to established patterns of living will continue well into the future. Professor Russell, like most experts, thinks many of the jobs made unnecessary by new technology will be ones requiring high levels of education and specialist knowledge. For example, many fewer lawyers and doctors will be needed given the way the expertise of the best can be packaged and made available worldwide. Why do we need the average hospital consultant or barrister when a computer programme will make the knowledge of the very best available to all for a tiny marginal cost? Similarly, who will need the average teacher or university lecturer when the best in the world can be streamed via the Internet to every tablet from Devizes to Dubai.

The experts, however, all seem to agree we will still need just as many people who earn their living by taking care of others and their personal

needs – from hairdressers to care home assistants. I hope that means there will continue to be a robust demand for priests.

Please note: when our expertise becomes redundant, there is still a value – including an economic value – on our humanity.

Let us keep this in mind as we reflect on our Gospel reading, and Mary's visit to Elizabeth to celebrate their pregnancies, for it is all about the value of humanity and of human life.

The first thing we notice is that this is a scene involving two women. For Matthew, the story of Jesus' conception and birth is all about Joseph, with Mary a passive actor; but for Luke it's all about Mary, and Joseph is barely mentioned. To be with Elizabeth, Mary travels from Galilee to the Hill Country of Judea, around 100 miles, entirely on her own. We sometimes absorb from the worst sort of religious art and literature the idea that Mary was meek and soft, but here we see a tough, independent, and adventurous woman; we need to understand her obedience to God in that light.

Each of the Gospels has their unique perspective, and Luke is often the easiest for people from our culture to engage with given his concern for inclusiveness and the value of the outsider. This is the Gospel we will read on most Sundays until the end of next November. If you aren't someone who makes reading the Bible a part of your life, Luke's Gospel is a great way to start doing so.

The second thing I notice about this scene is the sheer joy it takes in being human – joy in the love of extended families, joy in being alive even in difficult circumstances, joy in new life and the birth of children. Now, Christianity is a religion that acknowledges the darkness of much of our existence – most of all in the Cross. But it also remembers that life is for living and mostly it's worth celebrating.

Celebration is human. There is a time to fast, a time to wait, and a time to feast. Advent is a time to wait. Christmas is a time to feast. We sit now on the margins of those two seasons, trying to keep Advent as faithful Christians surrounded by a secular world that has already moved on to Christmas. The double nature of the Fourth Sunday in Advent seems especially appropriate this year, when much that brings us joy at Christmas is radically changed or entirely undone by the virus, by the fear of death and perhaps most of all by fear of causing the deaths of others. These are hard times to feast; yet our lives are immeasurably easier than those of Mary and Elizabeth, living in First Century Palestine under Roman Occupation.

A Christianity which is miserable, and only remembers our sins and the darkness of the world, is not one that is faithful to God or the picture of Christ painted in the Gospels. It is not in touch with our own humanity or the humanity of the woman who travelled 100 miles to celebrate her pregnancy with her relations.

The third and final observation I want to leave you with is the humanity of Jesus Christ – who was truly human and truly God. This statement is paradoxical, but stray too far from it and one ends up with a Christianity that is problematic in one way or another. In one direction, we risk turning Jesus into a good man who taught some wise things but has nothing to offer a world that will always be flawed and a human race that will always be prone to self-destruction. In the other direction, we have a God remote from the pains and sufferings of the humanity he created, enjoying Himself for a while with human pleasures, before pretending to die on the Cross: a superman who merely assumed a human costume without truly understanding our condition, our pains, or our joys.

In our Gospel reading, we see Jesus already human in Mary's womb; the creator of the stars and planets trusting a normal human mother for his sustenance and protection in a sometimes perilous childhood, and in

return giving her and Joseph love and, as the next chapter of Luke's Gospel unfashionably reminds us, obedience.

Our humanity was good enough for God, but we are a people increasingly alienated from our humanity and the symptoms of this are visible everywhere. We live longer and healthier lives than ever but are terrified by our own mortality, which we do our best to avoid confronting. We are terrified of sickness and terrified of risks generally, and so we find the joy sucked out of life by the incessant well-meaning advice which we ignore whenever it suits us.

Why are our young people so afflicted by mental health problems? Some people say this is just a matter of more awareness, but having spent the period before the pandemic living among people twenty years younger than me, I think the decline in mental health is real. I wouldn't discount both social media and the general negativity about the future playing a role, but I think there is also a deeper crisis of meaning in our lives. Most of us don't believe in God and therefore, at a time when we have fewer children than ever, much of our meaning comes through our jobs. The jobs that Professor Russell says his technology is about to kill off in huge numbers.

And so we wait, in this final week of Advent, for the birth of a new world filled with new life. New life for us is, as it was for Mary and Elizabeth, entirely in God's gift. Yet God's bountiful generosity is all around us. To find it, we need only look in the right place. And where is the right place to discover God's generosity? Almost certainly where no one else is looking.

And where might that be? Perhaps we need to look to our undervalued humanity.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.