

Advent 4 *Luke 1.26-38*

The two key figures in our Advent Gospels over these last weeks are John and Mary, with Gabriel as a slightly shadowy but significant personality in the background. All three point to new beginnings, and that's what I want to talk about today.

All three characters, Gabriel, John and Mary, appear twice and in different ways in my reading of this. It is Gabriel who announces to Zechariah and Elizabeth that despite their years and inability to have children, they are now to have a son and his name will be John. It is Gabriel also of course who announces that Mary is to have a child as well, and his name is also given in advance – Jesus. John is very present as an unborn child when Mary visits Elizabeth her relative after the angel's announcement. Fast forward thirty or so years, and it is John who becomes an announcer in his turn, telling his neighbours that they are to expect the messiah, they should repent. He then baptises Jesus. Mary agrees to have startling changes to her expected marriage to Joseph, as she will have a child somewhat independently of her prospective husband. Her visit to Elizabeth confirms all these new starts.

So Advent, the start of the Church's year, is a narrative with a broad pointer to something new. It's a bit like the beginning of a new calendar year, when we make New Year resolutions, but more profound. For a start, we tend to forget these by the end of January, if they were ever feasible in the first place. The more major difference is that Advent is not so much about us as God, or at least it is God who is making the resolutions rather than us. And the resolution God has decided upon, if you'll forgive the language which makes God much too much like us, is that the only way that human beings can have some kind of future is if God becomes a human being in turn. The creatures which God created out of love, who are so very close to God, but who consistently and from the very beginning turned away in defiance, require a radical solution. Phrased like that, it puts our own New Year thoughts into a bit of perspective: more visits to the gym, less chocolate!

Now incarnation or the notion that God comes among as a human being is not unique to Christianity, you only have to think about Greek and Roman gods and goddesses; but what I think is unique is the kind of earthly life and ministry Jesus had, the death he suffered as a result of it, and his resurrection; and also the sustained development of thinking dependent upon all that which we call Christian theology.

Advent is the proclamation of all that, which because it's so fundamental and important, we choose to repeat liturgically each year. The focus shifts from God to us when we look carefully at how we might respond. At one level it might never seem enough, but away with guilt this Advent! God is a God of mercy and loving kindness, a God also of small things, so if we are able after a difficult year to choose one small new beginning, that would be enough. And if you don't know where to start, begin with loving kindness to others and self. Amen