

Reflection for Sunday 20th December: Advent 4: LOVE (Luke 1:26-38)

Two weekends ago it was a great joy and privilege for me to take the wedding service for two dear friends, part of our church family. The November lockdown had already led to it being postponed once, and none of us knew if restrictions would ease to allow us to reschedule the service before Christmas. We could only decide whether to proceed at short notice, and thankfully everything was able to go ahead as planned, surrounded by a few close church friends. It was a beautiful day and a great celebration of love – the love of the couple for each other; of them both for their church; and also of all of us as their friends for them.

A Christian marriage service also celebrates a deeper love. The bible describes marriage as the perfect picture of God's relationship to his people. The word we use for this is '**covenant**' – it means a solemn promise based on love. It's not a contract, which can be broken, but rather an unconditional pledging of love and commitment to the other party.

As husband and wife make their vows to each other, so they echo the bigger story of the whole creation, as **God pledges his vows to us, and invites us to offer the same to him.**

It is this idea of covenant love which forms the backdrop to our famous story for today, as the Angel Gabriel visits the Virgin Mary. The word 'love' is never actually mentioned in the text, but the idea of covenant love underpins the whole narrative.

To start with, of course, it comes in *the context of an engagement* – the pledging of covenant love between Joseph and Mary. This pledge had yet to be fulfilled, but it was necessary for what was about to take place to become real. Even the Messiah needed a godly and stable family home to be born into, and Mary and Joseph were two remarkable young adults who could provide just that.

But the bigger love story here is between God and his world. All through the Old Testament, God had repeatedly spoken of his love for us human beings as a covenant. It was first made with Noah, then made more explicit with Abraham, and formalised in the time of Moses with the dramatic rescue from Egypt and the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. 'I will be your God, and you will be my people,' is the Almighty Lord's incredible promise to us.

And this promise is sustained through centuries of doubt, denial and disobedience on the part of God's people. Time and again God is conflicted as he agitates over this situation, and yet he always returns to his original promise: **'I will remember my covenant.'**

And when Gabriel comes to Mary, this covenant is renewed and fulfilled in the most extraordinary way. *God is coming to us:* Mary's promised child will be called 'the Son of the Most High'. God is no longer just writing love letters to his people through prophets, he is visiting directly. This Son will be the promised Messiah, and will establish this covenant promise eternally. To paraphrase a well-known modern worship song, 'Love came down to rescue us.' Unconditional covenant love.

God's covenant is always initiated by God. As St John summarises later in the bible: 'We love because God first loved us.' But it is a two-way street. And **in Mary's reply we also see the other half of the covenant fulfilled.** All God ever asks for is our love and obedience, and this is exactly what Mary offers. 'Mary hail, though afraid – she believed, she obeyed,' as the hymn we sang last week beautifully put it. She obeys because she trusts. She trusts because she *loves*.

So in this lovely encounter, we see the big story of God's covenant love for humanity played out and fulfilled – in one dramatic conversation, it encapsulates what this covenant is meant to be. God renews his love for his people; and one young woman – for a moment the representative of humanity – trusts and obeys. And in that act of trust and obedience, God's plans can move forward and the world will change forever.

But this is no mere theology. It is **a covenant that God invites *all of us* into.** We may not be asked to bear the Son of God, but God comes to each of us daily with the promise of his love, and simply invites our response. As we celebrate Mary's trust and obedience so we too are called to show that same love, that same trust and obedience. In this wider sense, Mary's calling is ours.

In a few minutes we will commemorate what this Messiah came to do, the ultimate covenantal act of love on our behalf. Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, celebrated in the act of sharing bread and wine, is his declaration that we have all found favour with God. And, as we receive it, I invite us all to affirm, as Mary did: 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'

And may the love of God which came into the world at Christmas be manifest in our hearts and lives afresh this day. Amen.