

Advent 4, a sermon, not preached, for All Saints,
Vendée, 2016

Isaiah 7 : 10 – 16

Psalm 80 : 1 – 8

Romans 1 : 1 – 7

Matthew 1 : 18 – end

Holy Father, glorify your son.

Holy Jesus, teach us.

Holy Spirit, inspire us.

Amen.

Please sit down.

There's a little old Christian lady living next door to an atheist. Every morning the lady comes out onto her front porch and shouts, "Praise the Lord".

The atheist yells back, "There is no God".

She does this every morning with the same result.

As time goes on, the lady runs into financial difficulties and has trouble buying food. She goes out onto the

porch and asks God for help with groceries. Then she says, "Praise the Lord". The next morning she goes out onto the porch and there are the groceries she'd asked for.

Of course she says, "Praise the Lord". The atheist jumps out from behind a bush and says, "Ha, I bought those groceries - there is no God".

The lady looks at him and smiles. She shouts "Praise the Lord, not only did you provide for me, Lord. You made Satan pay for the groceries!"

As we think about the Blessed Virgin Mary today, let's give thanks for the role of women in our lives and, particularly, in the church.

OT Lesson.

We have read Isaiah's prophesy that 'the Lord himself give you a sign. Look, the young woman is

with child and shall bear a son, and shall call him Immanuel', which means, of course, God with us.

NT Lesson.

Introducing himself to Christians in Rome, Paul claims to be a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ who was descended from David according to the flesh, through Joseph, and, of course, born of the Virgin Mary.

When the birth of Jesus was announced to Mary, her response of obedience resounds through the years, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Gospel.

Matthew reminds us of the circumstances in which Mary was 'found to be with child' and Joseph's difficulty in accepting this until God intervened, in a dream; and Joseph was reminded of the prophecy in Isaiah, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us'." And they named him 'Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins'. Of course, Jesus means Saviour.

Perhaps it is worth looking at the pattern of the service of Lessons and Carols, which we celebrated earlier this month. It was first introduced by Edward White Benson, who later became Archbishop of Canterbury, when he was Bishop of Truro towards the end of the 19th century. In its original form, the lessons begin with Genesis, the fall, our disobedience to God's specific command, original sin. They continue with the prophets, notably Isaiah, proclaiming that God will provide a solution. The solution is found in the birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. He is worshipped: by the angels; by Jewish shepherds; by gentile – non-Jewish – Wise Men.

The Word is made flesh and dwells among us, perfect God and perfect man. So the Gospel is proclaimed and we are called to respond in faith and obedience.

The acceptance, the obedience, of Mary is pivotal.

In South Africa, under the National Party regime, there was a somewhat Victorian and strictly Calvinistic understanding of the place of women. One rather quaint thing was in hotels. Women were not allowed into the bar – that was an all-male preserve. However, there was a place called the Ladies' Bar. Men and women were allowed to drink together there. That has changed. So we have witnessed not only a change in racial attitudes in South Africa but also a change in attitudes towards women, in society and in the church.

In the Anglican Church in Southern Africa, we have now had women priests for twenty-four years, long after Hong Kong, later than New Zealand, and two years before the Church of England. When I was first ordained, I must admit that I had not really thought about women priests. In 1981 we visited the USA and attended a service where a woman priest officiated. Experience helps acceptance. Thinking about the Blessed Virgin Mary, who more than she gives us the Body of Christ? Then there is Galatians 3 : 28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, *there is no longer male and female*; for all are one in Christ".

For Archbishop Desmond Tutu it was quite simple. If you only ordain men, you are discriminating against women. He couldn't stand discrimination of any kind. Therefore you ordain women. Q.E.D. And who am I to say, "I have been called to be a priest"

but say to a woman, who has received the same vocation, “You must be mistaken”? I know the church is enriched through the ministry of women priests.

Thank God for Mary. By accepting her calling to be the mother of Our Lord, we are able, today, to draw near and receive the body of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which he gave for us, and his blood, which he shed for us; to feed on him in our hearts by faith and with thanksgiving.

Like Mary, our acceptance, our obedience, is pivotal.

‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’ (Romans 1 v 7)