

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> December 2025: Advent 4 Benefice Holy Communion, Ampleforth.

Prayer for the Advent wreath candle 4:

*Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, merciful and gentle, to you be praise and glory for ever. Your light has shone in our darkened world, through the childbearing of blessed Mary; grant that we who have seen your glory may daily be renewed in your image and prepared like her for the coming of your son, who is the Lord and Saviour of all. Amen.*

One of our family jokes is when you hear of people who enjoy gossiping who say, “People are saying...”. When you then ask what people, saying what exactly...? The answer usually given is, “I don’t know, people are just saying...”

This is usually just negative talk, criticism and gossip for gossip’s sake, not accurate and usually destructive and hurtful. We might think people who speak like this don’t attend church, but it happens in our churches too, when the excuse for gossip is wrapped up in false justification and ‘people are saying’, becomes ‘people are praying’ as if that somehow makes it right, but there is no place in true prayer for gossip. Whatever the means you can usually guarantee that whoever the gossip and negative talk is aimed at, it is almost always totally unfounded, and it usually gets back to them, causing hurt. We all know it takes place in our community, and we know who the people are who do it. I know too. It is therefore the responsibility of all of us to challenge and call these people out.

This isn’t something new. You can imagine what was being said in the small and pious community of Nazareth 2000 years ago; an unmarried woman, an unplanned pregnancy, and an implausible explanation. It’s not hard to imagine

what ‘people were saying’, “Did you hear? Marys pregnant, I never expected this.”, “Mary and Joseph should know better. They aren’t even married yet.” “Well, I heard that Joseph’s not even the father. How could she do that to him? He’s such a good and just man.” “Who is the father anyway?” “They say Joseph still intends to take her as his wife. He’s still going to marry her after all this.” “This whole thing is a disgrace. She and her love child should be stoned. The law requires it.” ‘People were saying’ then, as they do now, causing hurt and sorrow, destroying reputations and health.

Joseph heard the whispers and saw the looks, if not in the village, then certainly in his own imagination as his private situation became a public scandal. He also knows there were questions of faithfulness because the child in Mary’s womb seems to point to that. By the light of day, it will all seem clear and Joseph will awake in the morning and do what he must do, send Mary away, do what the people think is right. But what appears to be one thing in the light of public scrutiny becomes another in the night of silence, when listening, and waiting takes place as the gossip continues in the shadows as it does today, hurting and destroying.

But what is right is revealed to Joseph in the night as the angel speaks to him. Yes, this a scandal, but it is not a scandal of immorality. The real scandal here is that God chooses to be with us, bringing to birth what is right, for Creation itself. The people thought God would send the Messiah, maybe sometime in the future to put things right, but instead it is going to happen through the pregnant Mary, now. The scandal of that pregnancy is that God is present, His Holy Spirit fills the womb of Mary, blowing redemption and transformation through her life. The scandal here is that humanity can become ‘pregnant’ with God when it is right.

Yes, Mary's pregnancy raises questions of faithfulness, but it is not the usual gossip accusing betrayal and infidelity. Rather, this pregnancy is a statement of God's faithfulness, and it calls commitment from God's people. In this pregnancy God renews all the covenants of history and chooses us to be His people. This pregnancy is God's faithfulness in the flesh of humanity. The child within Mary is a love child but that is not a euphemism for an illegitimate child born to unmarried parents. This child is the revelation of God's love for humanity, love that can be seen, heard, touched, embodied love of God which will feed and nourish God's people with His body and His blood.

Joseph's resolution to quietly dismiss Mary had given way in a night of dreaming, pondering, and wrestling. Now, Joseph's view of Mary, her pregnancy, even himself has been enlarged and opened. He has begun to see this situation, this scandalous pregnancy, through the eyes of faith rather than the gossip of the villagers. Mary's story and the angel's words now speak louder than anything the people can understand or appreciate far above and beyond any gossip.

The only reason this could happen is because Joseph entrusted himself to the inner world where angels appear, guide, and speak God's word, a world where God speaks the truth about us and sees more than we sometimes see for ourselves. Joseph experienced God with him, found holiness hidden in himself and the world, where it has always been hidden, in plain sight amongst the scandal and the gossip.

So, Joseph awoke in the morning and did what he had to do, not dismissing Mary, but emptying himself, letting go of fear, the villagers' gossip and stares, his own doubts and questions. He also let go of his own reputation and standing in the community, realise what his marriage to

Mary would now become, let go of the law and punishment. With each letting go Joseph emptied himself so that, by God's grace and mercy, he might become the man he was called to be, who would do the right thing; protect, nourish, and provide security to Mary and her child.

Joseph guides us to Christmas and invites us to enter the night in faith as he did and empty ourselves of all that keeps ourselves closed to doing what is right, even what the world sees it as scandalous. Things like fear, guilt, resentment and anger, the villagers' voices and stares, the thoughts that say we are not enough, the doubts of God's presence, the isolation and loneliness of loss and sorrow. Letting go of these things creates space, openness, and opportunity for God to bring Himself into the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.