

The Ordinary and Extraordinary: Advent 4

Sermon preached by Bishop Jo for the diocese of Guildford on Sunday 20th December 2020

[Luke 1.26-38](#)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

I imagine Mary kneading some dough one fine day in her parents' kitchen. A fairly ordinary girl living a fairly ordinary life, doing a very ordinary thing - pressing it, stretching it, pounding it, pulling it, no end to the beautiful texture and funny shapes - when an *extraordinary* thing happened. An angel pops up unannounced, as angels are wont to do - a little scary and dramatic, right there in the kitchen. You can imagine her saying perhaps, 'Did you get the right house?' Then, thinking of safeguarding concerns I'm sure, 'Shall I find my parents?' Then, after she's been addressed as 'highly favoured' thinking, 'O, please just wait while I run and take a shower and put on some decent clothes'. Doubtless later her mother might have asked, 'I hope you'd done the dishes and the surfaces were wiped and clean, darling'. No, no and no. God meets us in the midst of the ordinary, when we've got flour all over our hands. And what does the messenger of God announce? Essentially, into our nitty gritty a wider perspective: **God. World. Saviour.** I don't know if life was tough for her but I'm willing to bet it might have been - just the sort of circumstances, as for many of us now, that brings us to wonder is this what life is about? Is this all there is? And so the angel reminds, that since the beginning of time God had loved the world He created, and since early in the foundation of Israel had promised a Saviour. **God. World. Saviour.** But then finally he adds: **Here. Now. You.**

Ordinary girl kneading ordinary bread in an ordinary kitchen on an ordinary day. But the extraordinary thing about God is he loves the ordinary. It's through the ordinary things that God works in extraordinary ways, and even when we don't see it, when all we see it's the ordinary.

Mary listened. **God. World Saviour.** And responds: **‘What? How? Me?’**. Ordinary words though probably she said them in an extraordinary voice. [What? How? Me? Moi?]

Now, lest this angel starts to sound like some text message, I want to make clear that he was not confined to a tweet of 140 characters. So the angel explains in a little more detail what he meant, what God was doing. She was going to have a baby, God’s baby, and this baby was going to be the greatest and be a king forever.

I picture her with the dough in her hands just as she was forming it into a loaf. God’s bread, my hands, my oven. (Sorry about that pun - hard to resist). The divine extraordinary working in the human ordinary. That is God’s way.

Mary discovered it was God’s way with her cousin Elizabeth, who gave birth to another extraordinary baby in her old age. We know her exclamations of praise and excitement after she and Elizabeth meet up and compare notes. Over and over again she discovered it was God’s way with Jesus, as he did some extraordinary things with some very ordinary disciples. And still today.

As I go around this diocese I see over and over how God is doing extraordinary things with ordinary people in ordinary circumstances. In schools. In prisons. In car parks. Look on the website and find the story of the food being given away in some Camberley carparks in Old Dean and at St Mary’s, given for the blessing of whoever may need it. At the other side of the diocese I met a man who through dropping a bag of ordinary groceries at the local foodbank has found his life turned around, stirred to do extraordinary things using his IT skills to create a digital inclusion project to support children in their learning from home during the pandemic. Two weeks ago I joined an online vigil to pray for those caught up in Gender-Based Violence and the Sex-trafficking industry - an ordinary hour where we were joined together in silence and lit a candle, trusting God to work in extraordinary ways. Yesterday I received a Christmas letter from a former teacher of mine, a NT scholar, who reminded me it was at a confirmation service at Holy Trinity Guildford - through an ordinary sermon on Mt 28 to go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded’ and now even in his late 80s continues to write the most extraordinary books that are translated to all nations. And here in today’s gospel, a young teenage girl is called to bear a child, to be *the God-bearer*, to fulfil an utterly unique, the most ultimate bridging role between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human, between the spiritual and the physical - between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

We may be preoccupied, we may be resistant, we may be fearful... Yet God is present, in our homes, still popping up no matter our bubbles, still delivering messages no matter our isolation, still transforming ordinary people to do extraordinary things. It happens in that juxtaposition of **God! World! Saviour!** and **What? How? Me?** I wonder in what circumstances you might have uttered any of those words recently? And in particular, how you might bring them together.

I think of a young mum I spoke to not long ago, valiantly raising 3 young daughters who have had their share of struggles. ‘I’ve learned so much from listening and

supporting them that I realise I might have something to offer others. So I've signed up and am training to qualify as a counsellor. And d'you know, I realise what a blessing that is - as I listen to others it puts my own family situation in perspective. And helps me with what to say, how to cope'. Ordinary things that become extraordinary, even painful things that become redemptive. That is God's way. **God, world, Saviour. What, how, me.**

Yes, you. I am no Gabriel, no angel, but I do want to scatter some seed to set you wondering further. What extraordinary things might God seek to work through your seemingly ordinary life?

Whatever the ordinary parts of your life this day, this Christmas period, this new year: I wonder if you can identify some ordinary situations in your life where you might pin your ears back and listen afresh to God, seeking his call to you. It might be while cooking in the kitchen or digging in the garden. Or sitting in the chair. I urge you to dare to hold out your ordinariness - the 'what how me' stuff of your life - to the level of the divine extraordinary - 'God, world, Saviour'. There's a danger that this pandemic has closed down our horizons - and I urge you to be especially intentional in stretching them out again. And inviting God to interrupt you.

Our God who made the world interrupted it to send a Saviour. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. This is who we follow in discipleship. This is what brings us to tell and tend and teach and treasure and transform (the five marks of mission). To offer our lives to God for whatever.

Then I'd urge you to talk to someone about this. It might be your spouse, it might be a neighbour, it might be a spiritual director or a vocations adviser (those last two you track down through the Dio of Gfd website) to reflect on this. Even in tier 3 you can do over zoom or by phone or by meeting up for a walk & talk. About how your ordinary might become part of God's extraordinary.

To discern what God may want to get up to in the new year through you. To listen the soul into a place of discovery. To piece together your understanding and experience of the past with your circumstances in the present, with God's promises concerning the future. Essentially: **God! World! Saviour! and What? How? Me?**

That's what happened to Mary mother of our Lord 2000 years ago. And that's what kept on happening ever since. I think of the C5 Augustine, landing in Canterbury on a mission to bring the gospel to England. I think of Mary Sumner, founder of the Mothers' Union, over in Old Arlesford in 1876. I think of my New Testament professor, confirmed at HT Guildford.

Ever since the annunciation of Gabriel to Mary, we shouldn't be surprised, but expect God to be working out his extraordinary purposes through ordinary people, like you and me.

So, keep up the kneading, the digging, the walking: recognising how in the ordinary stuff of our lives God is at work in extraordinary ways.

Indeed Jesus talks about the yeast in such dough - which works often invisibly to make for tremendous transformation. He works in ordinary dough everywhere. He works even in dough that is full of gritty bits. He works again and again. He is working even when we don't see it. God's way is to come among us, to dwell with us and in us, and through us to raise life, to transform what is human ordinary into what is divine extraordinary.