

**Sermon, Fourth Sunday in Advent 4,  
Beverley and Brookton, 24<sup>th</sup> December, 2023**

Christmas is upon us! Have you done all your shopping? Have you made all the necessary preparations for a wonderful Christmas celebration? Have you got spare time on your hands? Could you answer the question: “How are you going?” without using that four-letter word: “busy”?

I hope you can all answer yes to these questions, but I suspect that with less than a day to go to Christmas many of you are feeling a little bit of stress. Christmas can be a stressful time; indeed a very difficult time for many people. All that needs to be done can seem quite overwhelming! More than that: the brokenness, darkness, pain, and problems of our life can be amplified at Christmas because of all the talk of good cheer and all the expectation that’s put on us to have a good time and be happy!

There are people for whom the lead up to Christmas is difficult but not as overwhelming as some of the other things with which they’re dealing! Relationship problems, health problems, feelings of worthlessness, of not being appreciated, of being hard done by, these can all be overwhelming. Worry and anxiety about different issues. The seeming absence of God and disconnection from Him can be overwhelming.

Feelings of guilt and shame can be overwhelming! Wherever we’re at though – we should spare a thought for Mary and the lead up to Christmas that she had! After the angel Gabriel appeared to her, she found herself in what should have been an overwhelming situation. She found herself with a serious relationship problem with Joseph. Could she have felt hard done by? What worries might she have had? How overwhelming might things have seemed?

It’s amazing that by all accounts Mary didn’t fret! The message of the angel – remember angel means “messenger” – was delivered and Mary accepted it! She humbly accepted the Word of God, and the Word became flesh in her womb! It seems Mary’s heart was still, and she was at peace – the message did what it was meant to!

You all know that I'm nothing like Gabriel but today I am your angel – and I have a message for you!

It's partly the same message that Mary accepted and it's my prayer that you accept it, that you take it to heart and that the Word will grow in you and help you as you face whatever may be an overwhelming situation for you!

The angel says to you too: "The Lord is with you! Do not be afraid! Nothing is impossible with God!" This message stills our hearts and gives us peace! When we accept this message and grasp the reality that Almighty God is with us, there is nothing we need to fear, and nothing is impossible with Him – it's overwhelming, but in a very good way! As with Mary, the Word of God, the Christ, lives in us!

When he lives in us there's nothing to fear and nothing is impossible! The forgiveness of sins, newness of life and freedom from guilt and shame is not impossible! The Resurrection and new creation is not impossible! Faith and obedience by the power of God is not impossible! A heart that is still and at peace is not impossible. What's also not impossible is God working out all those things that seem overwhelming. He worked blessing out of the cross and He can work out blessing out of every lesser evil.

Mary asked Gabriel a question when he had given her the news that the Saviour would grow and live in her: "How will this be?" We too might ask the same question. How will this be? When things are overwhelming - how will the Lord be with us? How will He deal with our fear? How will He do the seemingly impossible and free us from guilt and shame, make us obedient and give us hearts that are still and at peace. How will this be?

It will be when, we, like Mary, accept what God needs to give us - when we take the time to listen to and accept His Word seeking comfort, wisdom, and peace from the ultimate source of comfort, wisdom and peace! When we put it into practice! Four passages that I want to share with you today that are worth meditating on and praying over when things seem overwhelming are:

1) *"Be still and know that I am God."* Psalm 46:10

2) *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.* Proverbs 3:5-6

3) *Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret... Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret--it leads only to evil.* Psalm 37:5-8

4) *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud... Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.* Romans 12:16-21

We can fret and we can worry, and we can deal with what happens in the way that we think is best and do it in our strength. God says that our best response is to be still! To pray! To accept the counsel of God's word which changes our hearts and helps us to love and forgive!

With the help of God who is with us, whose love for us is unconditional and overwhelming, we can also have hearts that are still and at peace. We can submit to God, trust in Him and deal with others in loving and merciful ways! We can even be confident in the lead up to Christmas that things will work out! For nothing is impossible with God!