**Sermon Stowe Christmas Eve 2021**

I don’t want to talk too much tonight – we all need to get home at a good time but I do want to unpack our two reading which seem very important at this time. I want to focus, not on this immediate festival, enjoyable though it will be, but on the future, on expectations, and what we can learn from the readings. The reading from Isaiah is addressed to the Jewish nation in exile and is about their hopes, their expectations their longing for release and a return to their own land and their freedom to worship their God in their Temple. And Isaiah tells them God is in control and what you hope for is coming. A good message.

In his Gospel John takes an overview on what had happened – the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus who he identifies as God’s Son from the beginning of time. He knew the facts but needed to put them into perspective and show that everything was a part of God’s plan for his people. For John it was part of God’s plan that the Jews were released from exile, did rebuild their Temple. It was part of the plan that the word became flesh and dwelt among us through the birth and life of Jesus whose beginning we celebrate each Christmas. Their hopes for the future that first Christmas were invested, though they didn’t realise it, in this tiny child. I want to talk to you not about the minutiae of Christmas but the bigger picture; about our expectations; our hopes for the future.

This line of thought was prompted by Judith and I trying to clear out of boxes of old photographs and documents– or trying to – and came across this certificate that tells us that a new baby was awarded first prize in a Baby competition in Coventry. I guess the year was 1945. The baby was me, I was awarded first prize - something I was unaware of until very recently. I started to think about what expectations my mother had for me in my very early years. When I was born the world was at war. My father was serving in RAF in North England and only saw me once before he was sent to India for years. I guess my mother’s expectations were much more mundane than Mary, Jesus’ mother had. My mother hoped for health and safety for me and her and the safe return of my father. I’m here because she got all these things.

This led me to wonder and speculate about Mary’s expectations. She was a devout believer in God. She knew God and trusted that God had a special role for her and for her unborn child. She and her offspring had been identified as very special people but it would be remarkable if her expectations were anything like what actually happened. Did she hope Jesus would become a synagogue leader maybe.

You all know Jesus’ story fairy well. What’s sure is that Mary’s expectation must have changed as she experienced Jesus’ life. You could not miss the amazing events of his birth and the way he was protected by God’s plan. She saw what happened at his first visit to the Temple and later for his bar mitzvah, she heard about his wanderings around Galilee and Judaea, his disciples and the crowds who followed him, his teaching healings. She watched sometimes from afar and occasionally actually with him. What is certain to me is that Mary’s expectation and understanding changed as Jesus’ ministry developed and it ended in horror at the cross.

My speculative examination of the expectations of this amazing woman is all very interesting but I wonder how you fit yourself into this picture. I’m sure that at least some of us have experienced a personal encounter with God or an angel and been changed by the experience. One thing we can be sure of is that God knows each one of us and has a plan for us. Even if our experience was not as dramatic as Mary’s, each of here has followed a path through our life and I hope, prayed about how it might develop, whether our path was directly connected with the church or not.

St John calls Jesus the light of the world and that’s what he wants to give to each of us. He offers us, if we look for it, a light that will guide and direct us whoever we are, whatever stage in our life we have reached. As John wrote, “*He was in the world and though the world was made through him it did not recognise him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God.*”

So I want to ask you to think about your expectations for this Christmas – not to spoil the turkey or whatever you enjoy but in your quiet moments. Christmas is not an end in itself but a step along the way and a time of looking forward. Many of us have hopes for meeting up with family and friends, maybe for the first time in 2 years; hopes which look as though they will be realised. But we share the risk of being distracted by the secular preparations for Christmas, the actual day itself, and given lip service to Advent and Christmas. Do you have a vision for your future that extends beyond Christmas and New Year? Do you have an inkling of what God wants you to do in the days and months to come that will be your part in building His kingdom here on earth and in Stowe in particular?

Mary was taken by surprise by her encounters but trusted God. We should be confident that each of us is a part of God’s plan. But we won’t ever know unless we prayerfully seek to know and encounter the one who is able to do anything and everything – including changing you and me – bringing new life into his world.

Prayers:

Father God, as we celebrate the birth of your Son at this holy time, we pray for this church and for your church worldwide. We pray for it to flourish and be a blessing to all and to work for justice, reconciliation and your peace. LIYM HOP.

At this time Christians, the world over are celebrating the birth of the prince of peace. Open our hearts and minds that your love may be born in us and bear fruit. We remember and pray for those who have been driven from their homes by natural disaster and by conflict. We ask your blessing on those who work in your name to relieve their suffering. LIYM HOP

There was no room at the inn for your Son and his mother and father. Protect through your love in action those who have no home and those without work or income. Guide and protect those who work to relieve their pain and isolation. LIYM HOP

As we remember Mary’s pain of labour, hole in your hand those who are in pain or distress today. Protect those suffering from Covid19 and those who care for them. Let us remember for a few moments those we know who are in particular need. LIYM HOP

At this time of wonder shepherds heard news of great joy. Give us grace and courage to hear and speak about the good news of your Gospel. LIYM HOP

The angel’s song “Peace on earth to God’s people on earth.” We pray for strength and commitment for all who work for peace and justice in all the world. Bless and give wisdom to all leaders that they may take decisions that benefit all. LIYM HOP

We celebrate that heaven has come down to earth and earth is raised to heaven. We give thanks for the lives of those who are now safe in heaven in your light and peace. Let’s remember those known to us who have died esp. Ivy. LIYM HOP

Merciful Father accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen