**4th Sunday of Advent 2021 (Dec 19th) Sermon preached by Fr. Leonard in St. Paul’s Athens. Readings: Micah 5, 2-5; Heb 10, 5-10; Luke 1, 39-45.**

**Christmas Eve 18.00 – only on Zoom (see login details on website)**

**Christmas Morning: 10.00 in St. Paul’s Church**

Last Sunday I quoted from Rowan Williams new book ***Looking East in Winter, (Bloomsbury 2021 p145)*** He says, paraphrasing someone else, ‘the prophetic vision is… specifically the vision of all human flesh and every human face with the amazed attention that arises from the fact of God having become flesh and face.’ God in Christ, our Christmas narrative, is about God becoming flesh and face.

These previous two weeks in the Advent season we have had the luxury to dwell on the person of John the Baptizer. We have seen in the scriptures for these two Sundays the challenge and the dis-comfort of the voice that cries in the wilderness – the message of the one who prepares the way for the Lord’s coming. It is not easy reading, and it is a challenge to the preacher to bring into high relief, especially when we are all thinking about Christmas celebrations, the message of repentance and indeed of judgement.

John is the person, the voice, and the face of prophecy, being rooted in the tradition of the old promise, but who invites us to greet the arrival of the new promise in Jesus. John’s is the hard face of the Advent season.

If John is the hard face of this season, it is Mary’s that is the soft face of Advent, and we look to the expressions of her face on this Sunday nearest to Christmas.

Mary’s is the face of surprise, a puzzled look, a raised eye-brow as she ponders what seems to be happening around her. Yet her puzzlement is accompanied by acceptance and consent. Her’s is a face of grace – ‘Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favour with God’. This is how Gabriel greets her to announce his curious message. You have found favour – ***χάρις – ‘***grace’ with God. Blessed Mary is ‘full of grace’ as the angel expresses it – ‘grace-filled’. Mary is the ‘soft face’ of Advent – the face of gracefulness.

The Angel Gabriel greets Mary, a narrative we associate in scripture with March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation. It has been a difficult event for iconographers and religious artists to portray. I recall one 14th century painting where there is a fine gold line, like a golden thread, emanating from the mouth of the Archangel and entering the ear of Blessed Mary. Whether Mary receives the message via her ear, or via the ear of her heart, somehow neither seems to do justice to this story of a human being conceiving a child – however strange the event – nor to the face that shows surprise and puzzlement.

This whole section of St. Luke’s narrative is about strange conceptions – about women, Elizabeth and Mary, being with child outside normal circumstances – about messages and angels – it all seems a bit esoteric on this Sunday that is only one week before we celebrate God becoming flesh, God becoming face.

There may be some clue in all the greetings that thread through this narrative. Gabriel, we are told ‘greets’ Mary – is this a message from a distance, (my mind strays to childhood telecommunications with two tin cans attached by a length of string) or does Mary receive God’s message with the ear of her heart, located within her very being? Mary runs to the hill country to Elizabeth and ‘greets’ her with her good news; the child in Elizabeth’s womb has a sort of ‘quickening’ in her womb when he hears Mary’s greeting to Elizabeth. In the NT the word used for the greeting is ***ασπασμός,*** which can indeed mean a greeting, but also carries the meaning of a respectful embrace, or even a courteous kiss. Icons of the visit of Blessed Mary to Elizabeth usually show them stretching out to embrace each other, or indeed hugging one another, and the normal human thing to do would be to share a kiss of friendship. Voice of greeting; embrace; kiss.

It is in this embrace, this hug, this physical contact that Elizabeth realizes the child in her womb is leaping with joy – this child we would later come to know and deeply appreciate as John the Baptizer, the hard face of challenge in this Advent season. In one and the same encounter between Mary and Elizabeth we also have the graceful face of Mary.

On this Sunday – on the threshold between Advent and Christmas – there is much to leave us puzzled; much that we have to ponder. Some may wish not to stop and ponder the narrative of Mary just at this moment – but I urge you, don’t let Christmas happen for you without feeling surprised, year after year after year.

As Elizabeth says in her encounter with her cousin, ‘Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?’

Our perennial question is surely, why should this happen to us, that God becomes flesh and face in Jesus, born in Bethlehem as the prophet Micah foretold; why should this happen to me, that God in Christ should dwell in me, and that my face should be to others the face of Christ; and why should it happen to me, that Christ is in my neighbour, and showing himself in my neighbour’s face? We owe it to God and to ourselves to ponder this, and to experience how puzzling this divine and human truth really is!