

Year B Advent 4

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16

Rom 16: 25-27

Luke 1: 26-38

### **Surprised by God**

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable to you, my Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

This morning I want to talk about the OT reading from the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of Samuel and the Gospel from the first chapter of Luke. They have a lot in common even if it isn't blindingly obvious at first hearing.

In the OT reading we heard the story of King David and the prophet Nathan agreeing that it would be good to move God from the tent of meeting and in to a proper solid building made of fine cedar wood. What a good idea, and coming from a devout King and faithful prophet. Well, perhaps not. Despite this seeming like a good idea, considering what we know from the OT about King David— like all of us he had his flaws and weak spots – it leaves one wondering if in fact his motives were so pure after all. We often can spot wealthy people's vanity projects – an imposing building they funded or part-funded, and quite often on projects which aren't really designed to meet a real need, but somehow get approved and needs are moulded to fit the building, rather than the other way round. And in 2 Samuel we heard that God wasn't actually well pleased with this. David and Nathan hadn't actually got it right; their plan was not well pleasing to God. David and Nathan made an assumption that just

like David, as the King, God would be wanting fine house, with all the trappings that went with a royal residence. Maybe David's motivations were to build a house for God so that it might further his political ambitions, and Nathan may have thought it would raise his standing and religious objectives? And in the same position, I guess we may have thought the same things.

This story from 2 Samuel should not surprise us. We should not expect God to want to conform to the desires of men, that the thoughts of humans are not the same as God's thoughts, that God's ways are not our ways of doing things. Even if David's plan to build a house for God were of the purest intentions, we know that David was making an assumption that it would be pleasing to God. David and Nathan were I guess disappointed to find out that David's plan was not received so well by God. Maybe David and Nathan were surprised by God?

And in our reading from Luke, we can be fairly confident that Mary was surprised by God's messenger, in the shape of Gabriel. Here was Mary, an ordinary teenager, in a back of beyond village, betrothed to an older man. Nothing really remarkable about that scenario, 2000 years ago. Her engagement would have not raised any eyebrows. But along comes Gabriel. Their lovely conversation, gentle and full of wonderment, is rich and full of messages for us. Mary may be a young teenager, but she knows about pregnancy, and rightly asks how it can be that she will be pregnant. Gabriel gently reminds her that nothing is impossible with God. Mary's response is one of generosity and faith. She freely accepts the role God wishes her to have, and offers herself to God as God's servant in all matters of her life. Mary's stunning acceptance, has led many to wonder how she was chosen. Some suggest Gabriel had been hard at work for a few days trying to find someone willing to take on this onerous role and

all the women had so far said no. It paints quite a humorous picture; Gabriel knocking on lots of doors of young teenage girls, until with relief he finds one willing to accept the invitation. This not a picture I can accept. I think Mary's vocation, her calling, was always to be suited to this role. I think she had the right qualities. She was able to perform the role of Mother of God, from his upbringing right through to the Passion and Death of Jesus. But there was still the act of hearing the call and freely accepting it. It is important that Mary maintained her freewill, but that Mary herself knew her vocation and calling in some way, and was open to this message from Gabriel. So no, I don't think Gabriel went door to door in an exhausting hunt until he found a random teenager willing to accept the invitation.

So, how do the OT and gospel texts fit together? Well, the most obvious headline is that both these stories show people surprised by God's actions. In the OT, David and Nathan made assumptions about God, and got it wrong. What they thought would be well-pleasing to God, didn't actually match God's ways. David and Nathan wanted a God conveniently in the 'house next door' as if God could be tamed, confined, constrained, and God's purposes could conveniently be aligned to our own pet purposes, to help our agendas smoothly run along as we envision them. Well, surprise, surprise, God wasn't having that. God's purposes seldom match our agendas and purposes.

And in Mary, she may well have been surprised by God's request, but she was willing to accept a role that would support God's purposes. She had no personal agenda of her own, and her relationship with God was as a humble and obedient servant, discerning God's call and following it. Mary was transformed by her 'yes' from a teenage virgin betrothed to an older man in to one of the most significant and

creative agents for change not just in her time, but for eternity. She learnt that nothing is impossible with God.

These two passages raise issues for us today. From the OT reading we can learn that our assumptions about God can be way off beam. We can reflect on the times we have wanted to tame God, to have God neatly confined and constrained, to help achieve our purposes, persuading ourselves that they are really God's purposes. We should not be surprised that in those circumstances, God doesn't play ball. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, God's ways are not our ways.

From the gospel reading we can be truly amazed at Mary's response. Her willing 'yes'. Mary may have been surprised to be visited by Gabriel, but her response shows that at a deep level she was ready for this, and was not surprised by God's request. She was asked to perform this role because God knew she had the ability to do this; it was her calling, her vocation, where she could be the best she could possibly be in her life, performing this challenging role. It can leave us wondering who we are in relation to God's work and mission in this deeply troubled world. Would you know what your calling is? What is the best you can be? What barriers are there to you being the best you can be? Have you sensed God nudging you to deal with those things? Have you sensed God's direction in your life? If a messenger from God came and had a conversation with you, or may be just nudged you in a certain direction, would you recognise that this was in line with the God-given gifts you have?

Exactly who are we in relation to God's work and mission? Mary's stunning acceptance, her 'yes' freely given, is a timely reminder for us all that God has work for us all to do, to help deliver God's mission. Now, we know God isn't inviting you to be the Mother of

God, that position is already taken, but the God of surprises has I am sure been sending you messages and even now is nudging you from time to time. I wonder what God is asking you to say 'yes' to?