

Sunday 31st December 2017 (1st Sunday of Christmas)

St Faith, Havant

9.30am – Parish Mass

Isaiah 61.10-62.3; Galatians 4.4-7; St Luke 2.15-21

I wonder how Mary felt when the shepherds turned up? Was she delighted to receive well-meaning visitors? Was she a bit annoyed that these rough men babbling on excitedly about a vision of angels might wake the baby? Perhaps she just shrugged – the appearance of random shepherds might not have phased somebody who nine months ago had been visited by an angel who announced that she was miraculously pregnant. Once you've been told in person by a heavenly being that you're giving birth to the Son of God, I can't imagine much else really surprises you. Or, after an uncomfortable journey of 70 miles or more from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the stress of discovering that where you were planning on staying is actually full, the hurriedly improvised new accommodation, not to mention the exertions of childbirth...maybe, after all that, Mary was just too tired to care any more. 'Shepherds? Wise Men? All the heavenly host? Let 'em come. I just want a nap.'

One of those might sound a bit like your Christmas. You might have enjoyed having a house full of family and friends – or you might have been politely trying to get rid of relatives who were in danger of overstaying their welcome. You might have been desperate for some peace and quiet, only to be constantly

interrupted by people whose holiday spirits were rather higher than your own. Maybe the build-up to your Christmas celebrations was so chaotic and disorganised that nothing really surprised you, and you just muddled through as best you could. Or perhaps, if you're honest, it's all been just a bit too much to cope with. Through illness, over-exertion, or possibly over-indulgence(!), I bet that what some of us would honestly like right now is a good nap. (Possibly one lasting several days.)

Despite what many media and advertising outlets might try and persuade us, there isn't a 'right' or 'wrong' way to do Christmas. It's not compulsory to have a big family gathering, or hundreds of expensive presents. It's not a requirement to eat and drink yourself into a stupor if you don't want to. It's not a competition to have everything go exactly to plan – and nor is it a kind of reverse competition to see who has had the most disorganised week. And, just as there's no 'right' or 'wrong' way to do it, there's no 'right' or 'wrong' way to be feeling now. Whether you're happy or sad, excited or exhausted, wishing it would last forever or wishing it was all over already...that's okay. However you feel right now, it's fine to feel like that. You're not wrong.

I think one of the challenging things about Christmas when you're involved in any way in the church – as all of us are – is that it seems to go on for ever. All of the carol services, school assemblies, card-sending, present-buying – all of that happens

while the church calendar is still in Advent. Christmas adverts have been shown on TV since the middle of November, and Christmas promotions have been going on in the shops for even longer. So by the night of 24th December, when the church calendar decides Christmas is starting, we've all been doing Christmas for several weeks – whether we like it or not. And, even for the most merry and bright among us, that can be quite tiring. In particular, this Sunday – officially the First Sunday of Christmas, though it feels like we've been doing Christmas for three Sundays at least – can end up feeling a bit odd, maybe even a bit annoying. More Christmas carols? I feel like I've been singing carols for ever!

Instead, I'd like us to try and think of this Sunday as a gift. Not an expensive one. Not a flashy, noisy, one. But a quiet, simple gift from God to us. With the busyness of celebrating Christmas more or less behind us, and with the return to the normal routines of life still a few days away, God gives us today in which to pause, to dwell for a moment with him *in* Christmas, and to think. Here and now, as we gather at his table, we can offer to God the Christmas we have had – the Christmas we are still having – even as he offers himself to us once again in bread and wine.

I have no idea how Mary actually felt when the shepherds turned up. But however she felt – delighted, annoyed, non-

plussed, or just plain tired – St Luke tells us that the visit of the shepherds was one more thing to add to her rich treasury of experiences. It was another moment among so many moments in her incredible journey through that first Christmas for her to “ponder in her heart”. Not something to be experienced and then cast aside, but something to be stored up, to be thought about over time. Mary knew God in the babe in her arms, but she also knew him in the moments of quiet reflection. The angels and shepherds and the baby, the busyness and excitement, were Mary's gift from God at Christmas – but so too was the treasuring and the pondering on it all.

Perhaps you have managed to know God in his exciting gift of busyness this Christmas. Or perhaps, in the exhaustion of it all, you feel like you've somehow missed him. The gift of today, the gift of a church Christmas that's still starting when most people think Christmas has nearly finished, is the gift of a chance to catch our breath. An opportunity to thank God for where we have found him, or an opportunity to look back and see where he was all along. Whether we are animated, annoyed, or ailing, ready for a party or simply ready for bed, we can all follow the example of blessed Mary: take whatever this Christmas has been, treasure it, and ponder it in our hearts. For in stillness and reflection, just as in energy and busyness, we can gaze once again at the babe in the manger, and know ever more deeply the wonder of the gift of Emmanuel – God with us.