

YEAR B 4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Interest in our family histories seems to have become more and more popular as websites offer the opportunity to delve into the past and trace our lineage back down through the ages. Likewise, TV programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* in which celebrities are invited to share their stories can capture our imagination and encourage us to try to piece together our own family trees.

Among the interesting aspects of these programmes are the discoveries of eccentric ancestors. Sometimes they are heroic figures who withstood all kinds of adversity and you sense the pride in the celebrities as they reflect on how those same qualities were handed down to their parents or grandparents or even to themselves. By the same token, we sometimes see their distress when they uncover some deeply unhappy or criminal members of the family, whose stories are not so edifying. When this happens, it is interesting how the instinctive response is to look for some redeeming features or for reasons that would explain or excuse their behaviour.

Of course, there is nothing new in all this. The Jewish people were deeply imbued with the story of their ancestors and lived in hope that God would redeem them from past failures. Matthew and Luke provide us with genealogies of Jesus, which do not attempt to hide the rogues and miscreants in his family tree. After all, even King David's personal story is clouded by sin, but he repented and God forgave. Now the long-awaited Messiah is announced and Luke is concerned that we make the necessary connections, and see that this is God's plan, so long foretold by the prophets, coming to fulfilment. Isaiah prophesied that a "virgin would be with child": Mary is that virgin. Joseph, the one to whom she is betrothed, is of the House of David. There is another sign that God is blessing this new generation: it is to be found in the pregnancy of Elizabeth, who will be the mother of John the Baptist, the precursor of Jesus. Like Sarah and Hannah before her, she is, strictly speaking, beyond the age of child-bearing, but nothing is impossible to God.

As we approach the great feast of Christmas, once again the Church is inviting us to think about our heritage. Like the Jewish people of old, Christians are generally very conscious of the chequered history of the past two thousand

years. It is the story of saints and sinners, struggling with the complexities of life in every age. Pope Francis encourages us to grapple with the complexities of our own age and recognise the presence of God in all the confusion. Like the people of the Old Testament, we may often be tempted to imagine that God has abandoned us. But in his letters, Paul is constantly reminding us that, while the mystery may have been kept secret for endless ages, now it has been revealed and is accessible for everyone, including the pagans. We are part of the new inheritance, invited to be brothers and sisters of Jesus and therefore heirs to the kingdom of God. The message announced to Mary is proclaimed again this Christmas and we are to be its heralds.

Once Mary had given her consent – *“Let what you have said be done to me”* – we know that she hurries off to see her cousin Elizabeth, and it is then that St Luke places on her lips the words of the Magnificat: *“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit exults in God my saviour; because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid. Yes, from this day forward all generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me.”* When we are able to allow the Lord to place those same words on our lips then hopefully we will be beginning to see the connections in our own stories and the hand of God at work in them. Likewise we will be on the way to unlocking the mystery Paul writes about when he explains that God is wisdom itself and that our vocation is to give God glory through Jesus Christ. Christmas !!