

## 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Probably the most famous Christmas story in the world, apart from the Nativity story itself, is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*," It's done much to foster the conviction that Christmas is a time for forgiveness and family gatherings. Not only does the repentant Scrooge send a turkey to his long-suffering clerk Bob Cratchit, but Scrooge himself goes to dinner with his nephew and wider family. "Nothing could be heartier," Dickens wrote. "Scrooges niece looked the same. So did Topper when he came. So did the plump sister when she came. So did everyone when they came. Wonderful party, wonderful games, wonderful unanimity, won-der-ful happiness !"

If only. While Christmas is a time for extended families to meet, it's not always so pleasant. Christmas can be a time of tension and stress, as people discover how far they have drifted apart. It can be a lonely time for those who have no families or feel unable to join them. And the media make us aware of people who, like Jesus in his later life, have nowhere to lay their head. But, nonetheless, most people value Dickens' ideal picture of family support.

The English Bible translator John Wycliffe used the word "cousin" to denote the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth. Although later translators prefer the term "kinswoman", the idea of Mary and Elizabeth being close relatives has stuck. The bible doesn't tell us their precise relationship. But clearly Elizabeth was older. Perhaps "aunt" would be nearer the mark. It would certainly make human sense, because the young Mary was in need of support, and she would naturally turn to an older woman. Luke has recorded her submission to the angel's words, "let what you have said be done to me", but that doesn't mean that she just took her unexpected pregnancy in her stride.

Mary knew that she would have to face Joseph, and she genuinely didn't know how he would react. Indeed, as Matthew's Gospel tells us, his first reaction was to divorce, not to support her. There would be disapproval of neighbours and relatives: no respectable girl got herself pregnant before marriage, and no one would believe her story about angels. Mary may have been frightened not just because of people's reactions but also of the physical trauma of childbirth, potentially on her own with no one to hold her hand. Death in childbirth was far more common then than it is today.

So Elizabeth was a natural person to turn to, to share the news and to seek support. This encounter isn't essential to the story of the incarnation. It's

put there by Luke because he wants to remind us that Our Lord's mother needed support, and that she found it within her wider family. It became a high point for both women, as each received reassurance that God was very much in their respective pregnancies. Never was there a time when God's institution of family was more important.

We don't need Dickens' story to remind us of the potential value and desirability of family unity and support. But to find such a reminder in the biblical story tells us that God values it highly too. Therefore it's something to cherish and nurture for God's sake, for others' sake, and for our own sake – and not just at this time of year. We could ask, who would I turn to if I faced such a crisis ? Who could I trust, and lean on ? And who would actually come to me if they were worried or in trouble ? God has placed us in families for good reason. While family members may fight and argue, God's purpose is that we should still find and give support when we each need it.

The way towards that happy ending is to develop and nurture those relationships during the easier times. Not to lose touch over the year and only catch up on the news at Christmas, but to take time for and interest in each other at all times. Perhaps we might use this Christmas and its lead up time - and the time that follows - to look in a new way at the people around us, and see them as God sees them: people to love and be loved by. And let's look in a new way at all those Christmas cards lining our homes, and the email greetings stored on our computers. Let's take time to thank God for each sender, and to resolve to pray for them and seek their welfare in a deeper way than simply wishing them "Merry Christmas."