

The Blessed Virgin Mary
Advent IV/Christmas Eve 2017 – St. Lawrence's 9.30am

In a previous existence, as Chaplain at Sidney Sussex College Cambridge one of the more curious aspects of my role was to be the keeper of Oliver Cromwell's head – which was buried in the Chapel. Who knows where the rest of his body is – it had been dug up by vengeful Royalists when Charles II came back to the throne, who then chopped the head off and placed on it a traitor's spike at Westminster. It ended up, years later, in Sidney Sussex for protection – for Cromwell was the College's most famous old boy: MP, Commander of the New Model Army, the man who killed the King, and made this country for a brief time a Republic.

He was also of course the man who, among other things, banned Christmas! He thought the celebrations were much too frivolous, and insofar as they were religious it was the wrong kind of religion – far too superstitious, far too Catholic, far too interested in the Virgin Mary. Cromwell did not think much of Mary. He would have no truck with Advent IV making her its special focus. In Ely Cathedral, he first stationed his horses in the Chapel dedicated to her, and then had his soldiers hack the head from her statues and those of the other saints surrounding her. The only sermon he would give you about Mary would be one which told you why Catholics were wrong, wrong, wrong in all that they said about her, and why all that superstition and idolatry should be literally consigned to the flames.

We live now in different times, thank goodness, and the Church of England has recovered good sense about Mary. But why was Cromwell wrong?

Let me take around about approach to that. One of the most amazing things in life is the first visit to the hospital when you're going to have a baby. You go for that first scan at twelve weeks, perhaps even earlier. You go knowing you're pregnant, but not knowing whether everything's OK – above all, not knowing whether everything is OK, whether that heart is beating. You sit there, scrunched up with anxiety, not daring to hope too much. The feeling of relief, the sheer release when the scanner shows that tiny little being and the you can hear that heart pumping away furiously is astonishing. And then suddenly it's real – not just an idea anymore: you suddenly see this tiny, vulnerable human trying to live.

Well, that's how Jesus started. Christians believe that when God came to earth, he didn't come in power and glory and strength. He came as a tiny bunch of cells, heart thumping away, held inside a woman, needing her for everything. God made himself one of us – fleshly, needy, vulnerable one of us. In the centuries to come, Christians would be tempted in all sorts of ways to forget that, to turn Jesus into some kind of superman, ruler of the universe. One of the ways the Church tried to make sure that didn't happen was to remember and celebrate Mary. To remember that Jesus started where we all start, in a woman's belly. To remember that he was that vulnerable scrap of life you see on the first photos from the hospital. And to remember the strangest mystery of all: that Jesus only gets to exist because Mary says yes - because Mary is willing to let him be, and to love him into life.

Jesus as one of us. Jesus as vulnerable, as needy. That's the first reason we make a fuss of Mary. But there's another edge to her meaning. She is the *Virgin* Mary. Her child is the one of us who was not made like one of us, who had no human father. Why on earth is that? Why do we remember and celebrate that? Some people think it is because sex is somehow dirty, not holy, that God could not be possibly mixed up with all of that. If you listen to them, you might think Mary was too busy praying and being good to have sex, and that's why we celebrate her.

No, no, no. A God who was happy to born, and willing to die – which are both after all rather raw, smelly, bloody experiences – is not going to have any problem with sex. He was born of a Virgin to make a different point. God was saying, here's something the world can't do for itself. Jesus, this life of pure love and goodness and joy, is something beyond our capacity to produce. Left to itself, humanity's story is one of battles, and bad news and tears. All our lives, from the word go, share in that sadness and failure. All, except for Jesus. He was one of us, yes - but one of us without the sadness, the darkness, the gone-wrongness. He was us as we are meant to be. You might even say he was the only true human. And humanity could not do this for itself. It had to be a fresh act of God, as new and out of nowhere as in the very beginning, when he made the world. He made Jesus, as he made the world, out of nothing. This birth, this babe, is mystery.

And that, very briefly, is why Cromwell was wrong, and we are right – right to right to sing and speak about and celebrate the Blessed Virgin Mary today. We remember Mary to tell us that Jesus was one of us, come from inside a woman, a little bunch of cells rising up to be the truly human one. And we remember Mary the Virgin to tell us that this was God's doing, that here tired old humanity gave way to something fresh and pure and beautifully new from God. We remember Mary to point us to Jesus. And with her, we give him the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Peter Waddell