

SERMON

Canon Dr Sandra Millar, Head of Welcome and Life Events

May I speak in the name of God who is creator, Redeemer, and sustainer, Amen.

It's the fourth Sunday of Advent. And it might just feel like everything is about ready for Christmas. But the fact is that the story is just beginning, as one of the central characters moves on to the stage, Mary, mother of Jesus. So the scene is set, ready for the perfect story of Christmas to begin. Except it's not perfect at all. I wonder if as you've put all your decorations around the house and on to the tree, you always find room for that one that you've kept for years, that one that you hold on to for sentimental reasons, or that one that's a bit wonky and torn because the children or the grandchildren made it for you.

In our family, it's a small musical plastic crib. It's well over 60 years old and the shepherd's lambs and wise men are meant to go round and round in a circle, sort of endlessly visiting the little family in the stable. But by now, one of the wise men has gone decidedly wonky and the shepherds have gone missing, the sheep have fallen off, and Joseph has disappeared altogether. But we still keep it and put it out every year. Because it's precious to us, it holds memories, even though it's a bit broken. This Christmas might be feeling more than a bit broken, it might feel broken because you can't travel to be with the people you'd like to be with, or broken because financially, you can't provide in the way you would want to provide or perhaps broken because your relationships have fractured and fallen apart under the strain of the past few months.

Or maybe you're living with a life changing diagnosis. Or perhaps it's just broken because the person you love is no longer in the world. Actually every Christmas will have some of those feelings and moments in it. But maybe this year, they just feel as if they've come into sharper focus. And alongside that all the advertising, the talk and the media helps us to think we've got to create the best Christmas ever, the one that is just going to be perfect for everyone. And all of that places unrealistic expectations on us. And perhaps all we want is a few moments to feel just a little bit sad. But as we get ready to hear the story once again, we discover it's always been a story of light and shadows, comfort and joy. It's always been the promise of Advent, spoken into broken lives, and a broken world.

Because after all, it's when we're broken that we need to hear words of comfort and joy. The story of Mary is not a perfect story. It's the story of a young unmarried woman living in a small village who will be criticised and condemned as she discovers she is pregnant. We don't know that much about her situation.

But so much of our art and our Christmas cards show her living in a perfectly neat and ordered world. But in reality, she was living her ordinary modest life under the shadow of the Roman Empire in an occupied country and with all the challenges that that presented.

And it's into that situation that the angel speaks the great words of promise, 'the Lord is with you, nothing is impossible to God'. That's the promise she will hold on to, even as she makes her journey to Bethlehem and gives birth to her child in a stable. And Mary's not the only woman whose name we hear today, her cousin Elizabeth has not had a perfect life either. For her, there has been the terrible pain of longing for many, many years for a child that never comes, and all the grief that that entails. And it's to these two women, that God speaks the promise of a future of healing and of light in the darkness. And that's the same promise that God spoke to his people generations long gone, the great words of comfort that we heard in the prophet Isaiah. That's the Advent promise that God is with us, and will meet us where we are in our lives that are such a mixture of light and shade.

The poet Ann Lewin in one of her poems, simply called "Merry Christmas", poses the question to us all. How can we be midwives to the love of God in our world? And in these last few days before Christmas day itself, perhaps you and I can think about how we live out that advent promise, bringing that message of hope to those around us. And this year, we've learned such a lot about what it means to be alongside those who are bereaved, to notice those who are struggling with life. And the things we've learned, those principles, can be the same ones that we use right now to reach out to everyone who feels a bit, well a bit broken, this Christmas, for whatever reason.

And it's as simple as contact, listen, bless. Just get in touch with someone, just as the angel got in touch with Mary and Mary got in touch with Elizabeth. Do it in whatever way works for you, drop a card round, make a phone call, arrange to meet someone on social media. And when you do, get in touch, listen, listen to each other's stories. Listen to the stories of delight, and listen to the stories of sadness, and respond to those stories as Mary and Elizabeth did. Make space for all the mixed emotions of this year and then keep on blessing with those little kindnesses that means so much to people and that somehow, in a small way reflects something of the great love of God that came into the world at Christmas. It might be the unexpected homemade gift on a doorstep, it might be simply a wave from a window. However you do it, we too can help to share that message of hope. And as we do so, we might just find that the broken Christmas has become very precious.

Just as the broken Nativity turned out to be very precious in my family. Christmas will begin to contain a new depth of meaning that stays long after the decorations have been put away. Because we will hold on to the deep hope that comes in Advent. The hope that's not just about having a nice Christmas this year, but it's hope in the truth of a God who comes amongst us to share our lives, to reveal his love and feel our pain. We will find comfort in our sadnesses and we will find joy in the love we discover, as we realise again, the promise that each and every one of us is precious to God.