

**May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.**

Ninety days ago, I embarked on a journey into the unknown to be this year's intern for Christ Church. I was filled with uncertainty about how I would be received and what lay ahead. I vividly remember my nervousness on the aeroplane, and the questions that filled my mind as I stood alone outside Vienna airport, waiting for Monika Weber-Fahr, who had kindly offered to host me for the first couple of weeks. Just 24 hours earlier, I had been in Rochester Cathedral with a close friend, contemplating various scenarios for this experience. However, none of those thoughts and prayers eased my nerves when I found myself alone in a foreign country.

Fortunately, I met all of you, and I am very grateful for the warm welcome into the Christ Church family. Thank you for making me feel at home over the last three months; this experience has been very special in forming new relationships and seeing the inner workings of a church, a faith community. There is so much involved and it is more than one can imagine. I appreciate each of you for being a part of this journey. Time has flown and now it's time to return to London to my family, friends, and my home parish of St Stephen's, Dulwich for three months to return in April. Why? Brexit! I look forward to sharing my experiences and telling everyone how much you have enriched me. Thank you.

Looking at today's gospel, I can only imagine Mary's trepidation as she journeyed to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Would Elizabeth believe in God's intervention, or would she be swayed by rumours and gossip? As it turned out, Mary had nothing to fear; Elizabeth welcomed her with open arms, declaring, "The mother of my Lord comes to me! For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy." This powerful moment confirmed that Mary was indeed carrying the Son of God, providing immense comfort to her.

It is impossible to grasp the courage it took for Mary to embrace God's plan - a young woman chosen to bare the Son of God while facing the stigma of being unwed. She risked stoning and the disapproval of society, yet her faith in the Lord prevailed. She surrendered her own aspirations to fulfill the divine purpose, ultimately witnessing her Son's crucifixion and resurrection. Throughout it all, she never wavered in her belief, fully embracing the magnitude of her calling. As Luke writes elsewhere, "But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." (2.19)

Many of us take risks in life, but how many of us would be prepared to take a faith based risk and fully give ourselves to the Lord and His will? As the Jack Cassidy song says "Let Go, Let God". How many of us would let go of our own desires if God had other plans for us? How many of us would be able to let go of our plans and hopes for the future, if they conflicted with God's plan for us? It is not a small ask, and I doubt many of us would be able to do it. Yet this is what we should all be working toward because God knows what is right for us and He won't steer us wrongly, yet many of us as practicing Christians

would struggle to give up our own selfish desires to fulfill God's will for us if they were to clash.

Mary is pivotal to God's plan for the salvation of the world. She chose to obey God's will, and look at the blessings that followed. God does not impose Himself upon us; we all have the choice to accept or reject Him. He makes the impossible possible when we open our hearts to Him. Let us learn to trust as Mary did, setting aside our egos and desires. May we take on the challenge to live more godly lives—not just on Sundays, but every day of the week in every aspect of our daily existence.

God changes people from the inside out. He enables us to change for the better, to turn our selfish habits into acts of kindness and understanding. Each of us is responsible for ensuring that we do as Jesus did accepting those that society may not, showing kindness and understanding where it may not be the norm to do so. Jesus embraced the societal undesirables and we must all be open to doing the same. We need to be the people who would have welcomed Mary in and cared for her rather than being those who would have ostracised and shunned her. Let us open our hearts with love and generosity. Let us think of others as we approach Christmas. Is there someone you know who will be spending Christmas alone? If so will you make room for them at your table?

I wish you all a blessed Christmastide.

Amen