

## A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Advent 4      24<sup>th</sup> December 2017

Romans 16.25-27      Luke 1.26-38

### God's Strength, God's presence, and God's Grace

When I looked at this morning's passages earlier in the week, I wasn't feeling at all well, and my brain was a bit of a mush. So I decided all I could do would be that thing we sometimes do in Bible Study groups and meetings – just to read the passages, and see what phrases jumped out at me personally as a kind of take-home message. And then share them very simply with you.

The first phrase came from the Romans reading – and isn't surprising, really, given how I was feeling! '*God, who is able to strengthen you*'. (Romans 16.25). I was feeling pretty weak and in need of strength. For me, it was because of physical illness, but there may be more than one of us here today who feels – for whatever reason and in whatever respect – *weak* (or as we used to say in our family, 'a bit feak and weeble'). Perhaps we feel ineffectual or useless. The take-home message

I'd like to share from the Epistle is that, however we feel, God is able to strengthen us. I don't think (or experience!) that this necessarily means that we'll necessarily have the sudden sensation of rising up 'as a giant refreshed'; but I do think the message is that we can trust that even in our weakness, God can use us, much more than we can imagine. We can trust him to be at work in what look like our feeble efforts to serve him and other people – or even just to pray. His strength will be made perfect in our weakness. It's just a matter of wanting his will to be done in whatever concerns us, handing it over, and trusting. '*God... is able to strengthen you...*'

Take-home messages two and three come from the Gospel story, and you might think they're a bit presumptuous, because they were statements made to Mary at that absolutely unique moment of the Annunciation and the conception of Christ, and I 'heard' them as though addressed to me – or to any one of us – in the middle of our very ordinary Christian lives. But bear with me.

So, here's take-home message 2 : '*The Lord is with you*' (Luke 1.28). Not. '*The Lord will be with you*', or '*The*

Lord is with you whenever you remember him and call upon him'...but very simply, he *is* with you, whether you're conscious of it or not, whether you're in a pious pose, or not . Whatever you're feeling like.

In this sense, it's a message rather like the first one, and very closely linked to it. Our feelings are rather irrelevant.

Many classic pictures of the annunciation have shown Mary at prayer when the angel came, or in a state of some serenity. But we're not told anything of the kind. And In more recent centuries people have imagined Mary as busy – sweeping, on the way to the well – or on her bed (as in Rosetti's painting). A little re-telling of the Christmas story we're giving to children this year suggests that she might have been actually asleep, and woken from a dream, and have hidden under her covers when the angel appeared! We just don't know. But, *'the Lord is with you'* - it's stated simply as a matter of fact, wherever she was. Of course, this was the prelude to the message that the Lord was coming to be even more with her – and with us: but he was already there, part of her life. And, dare we say it, part of ours, wherever we are, whatever we're doing,

whether we're paying attention to him or not. Whether we can find words or dispositions to pray with. We are Christians; we are baptised; we are fed by the bread of life. He is with us; on the whole, this is a comforting thought , because only so can he strengthen us– but perhaps not, if we're busy betraying him.

And now, here's take-home message number 3 – and it may seem even more presumptuous to apply it to ourselves, as it's something we so specially think of as a word to the blessed virgin – but let's go, anyway – because really it can be true of us because of both the other messages we've been thinking of: *'You have found favour with God'* ( Luke 1.30) . Here's that word 'favour' which can also be translated as 'Grace'. *Hail, Mary ,full of grace....* the traditional opening of the angel's message to Mary.

'Full of grace' – it really sounds quite beautiful, doesn't it? She must have been a very special person. Perhaps we feel that Mary must have pleased God very much; something about her must have marked her out for this special task.

And yet, if we stop, we know that however unique Our Lady was and is, we all live by grace – by God's favour.

He smiles on us, because he loves us, and not because of what we've done, or even because of what our personalities are like. It's a *grace*, a gift, that he has made us, and loved us, and called us to know him. It's by his favour, his grace, that we're Christians *at all*, however imperfect ones. We all, in our way, '*have found favour with God*' and have grace, his gifts, acting within us, or we wouldn't be here today. And we all have a purpose in his plans.

Which brings us full circle back to take-way message number one: *God is able to strengthen us* for his purpose, whatever it is.

And over the next few days his purpose for us might just come down to being loving with one another, being joyful, and being trusting – finding and remembering the truth that he is *with us*, both in the celebrations and the relaxation – even watching loads of TV - but also in the middle of whatever might be stressing or worrying us, or making us feel weak and challenged.