

Advent 4 Sermon
given by Fr Nigel Prior

Today's last Sunday, Advent window, opens our thinking and prayers to Mary, as the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray to her as we would ask any other Christian to pray for us: Mary is herself one of the faithful redeemed by Jesus Christ. In today's Gospel scene of the Visitation, you can sense why we believe she is also the mother of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. This gives her a special place in the life of the Church, a special place in its prayer and devotion. For just as she was the mother of our Saviour, so we pray that she will help and support our own life faith with a mother's love. It was Elizabeth who first cried out

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb”.

And that heartfelt burst of joy has become a source of regular prayer and devotion over centuries. Even if it is not part of your own tradition or Christian upbringing, the ‘Angelus’ remains to this day, the heartbeat of daily prayer across the world, and across denominational ‘divides’. Isn't it good to share different ways of praying? Originally, like so many devotions, ‘The Angelus’ was traditionally said at the beginning and end of the working day and at its middle. It was a simple way for ordinary Christians to make the day holy and to imitate the regular daily prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours celebrated by monks and priests. To help people observe the devotion in common, wherever they were at work, the bells of the church would be rung.

As a form of prayer it simply recalls the incarnation of Jesus and the part Mary played in accepting the imitation of the angel. Each verse and response is followed by a ‘Hail Mary’, and the whole devotion is completed with a prayer in which we see our own lives mirrored in hers: through the Gospel we too have received the promise of salvation by Jesus; we are saved by sharing in the mystery of his birth, death and resurrection. It is a reminder that each of us is invited to bring Christ into the world through our own lives.

Of course, there are many other examples of Christian prayer and devotion – tonight's ‘Compline’ is another simple and beautiful ‘way-in’ to contemplative prayer. It is as if we don't have to worry about all the words, or what to say, because they have a pattern and power all of their own. And, I would say, their rhythm and repetition helps us to listen and respond to God.

So often our prayers seem to want to tell God what to do, and not the other way around! So I personally value that corrective, as I also value what lies at the heart of today's Gospel. It is the combination of surprise and joy. Elizabeth wasn't expecting Mary's visit, and certainly wasn't expecting Mary's ‘Magnificat’ but this inspiring combination of joyful response and joyful praise is surely the best foundation for all our prayers and worship, as we prepare to welcome the Christ-child again, into our hearts and homes, and into the life of our ‘holy, catholic and apostolic church’.