

St Clement's Anglican Church
The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, year 'A'
08 September 2020
The Rev'd Helen Dunn

**What sort of beauty might this be? (a sermon for the Reverend André Stephany's
induction as rector)**

Good evening, please be seated. Thank you Archbishop Melissa for the invitation to preach on this most august feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Nativity meaning “the occasion of a person’s birth”, the occasion of a person’s beginning.

My name is Helen, hi everybody. I’m the Vicar at Christ Church Cathedral and I was very fortunate to work with André during his curacy.

André’s beginning at the Cathedral. Let me set the scene. It’s Day 1. The staff team is waiting with eager expectation. What will this German, who spent time in the Holy Land, who lived in England, who is newly immigrated to Canada, what will this person be like?

In walks André: white, long-sleeve, dress shirt---Soho cut, French cuffs; Chino trousers, freshly pressed; shoes: brogue captoes in cognac. Me and the staff team, we look at André, we look at each other, we look down at our own clothing and we say, “It’s his first day. It’s because it’s his first day.”

Day 2, in walks André: button down, oxford polo shirt---milano fit; again, Chino trousers, freshly pressed; textured leather lace up shoes. Once again we look at André, we look at each other and we say, “It’s because it’s his first week, just wait till next week, it’s because it’s his first week.”

The following week, the following months, in walks André: each time more sartorially splendid than the last, and we finally come to terms as a staff team that we’re really going to have to up our game if we want to keep up with this curate! I have had the privilege of getting to know André this past year. André first a deacon and then priest, André who has a particular gift for paying attention to beauty (not only when it comes to his wardrobe). It’s this gift I’d like to talk about today.

Paying attention to beauty. This is a gift from God that is prototypically revealed in the person of Mary. Mary shows us the way when it comes to God’s beauty. It’s no surprise that some of the most beautiful sculptures around the world are of Mary. The Pieta in Durham Cathedral by

Fenwick Lawson, sculpted from beech wood and brass. The sculpture is in two parts: Mary, upright, arms stretched down by her side, and Jesus lying at her feet. One art historian describes the sculpture this way:

Death is shown through the . . . bruised, bent knees and the dismembered, unformed arm [of the Christ figure]. Resurrection and life are expressed through the lifting arm and the dynamic of the hand, stretched out to the mother The unpolished brass, which is a vehicle for light and a metaphor for life, is meant to reinforce this and signifies the transfiguration of Christ earlier in his life. [E]ven in death, God's light is not extinguished. The splitting of the wood in the mother's face expresses the trauma of bereavement. She is both Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the universal mother who has contained and given life, now expressing understanding and compassion at the death of her child. She represents all people who have stayed alongside others in their suffering. The outward gesture of her hand offers life Her presence at the cross is an example of discipleship and love that does not count the cost but is shaped by love for others.¹

This wooden sculpture was at one time displayed in York Minster in England where it survived a pretty major fire in the '80s. We're told that during the fire: "the Christ figure was under burning timber but the mother was saved by a wrought iron screen. They were both splattered with molten lead falling from the roof, which the sculptor sees as enhancing the meaning . . . in a way that he could not have done himself."

This and other sculptures of Mary show us that when we celebrate the nativity of the blessed virgin, we do so because Mary so profoundly informs our understanding of the Christ figure. Their two stories are inseparable. Now, we don't actually have an account of Mary's birth in our modern, pew Bibles. The closest account is in what we call an apocryphal book, *The Gospel of James* where we learn about Mary's parents Anna and Joachim, who, like many of their ancestors, are this couple who long for a child and at long last give birth to Mary.

By contrast, the gospel reading we heard this evening introduces Mary at about age 14. An angel appears. The angel has an announcement. Mary will conceive and bear a son, and she will name him Jesus. You'd think with such big news there would be context, like maybe a couple of paragraphs, maybe some background from the angel. But Mary gets very little. And the first portrait we have of Mary is one where she is poised in almost sculpture-like fashion, considering, perhaps, where there might be beauty in what's about to take place.

¹Sunniside Local History Society, "Christianity inside Durham Cathedral" available online at <https://www.sunnisidelocalhistorysociety.co.uk/cathedral.html>

“She was much perplexed by [the angel’s] words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”² Pondered, not ran in the opposite direction, not accepted the news without doubt or fear or question, but pondered. It’s interesting - in no other story in the Bible where an angel appears to a human being does the person just stay put and have a think. But with Mary it’s like there’s something in her that just says, “Okay yeah let me see what I can do with this.” Her posture is both reflective and prophetic. It’s like she’s seen a lot in life and she’s got this resilience and willingness to fold it into her journey in a way that is practical, wise, and inspiring.

I have to touch on our reading from the prophet Isaiah because we have some really beautiful imagery there, too. Isaiah uses this image of a wedding. A wedding is a kind of nativity, a kind of birth, isn’t it? Isaiah calls the people of God to a fresh start, likening their new beginning to the beauty of a bridegroom decked with garlands and a bride adorned with jewels. Maybe you can put yourselves in the shoes of Isaiah’s community for a moment. A community that has seen so much change, lived through pandemics...raised up leaders to considerable positions of authority....and here they are, a prophet calling them to step into their next chapter not with fear and trepidation, or with dread (what might happen next?), but to embrace their new beginning as though it were the most beautiful thing in the world.

There is beauty in new beginnings.

Do you know, in the first few weeks of André’s curacy, he was asked to officiate at the funeral for a person he’d never met. André met maybe one or two times with the family, everything coming together very quickly. During the homily, during the sermon, André pondered what sort of beauty this person’s life might have held, attending to the very little he’d been given as though each detail about this man’s life were a jewel, a garland around a bridegroom’s neck. I remember it as an incredibly tender sermon and really a hallmark of André’s ministry.

It’s often the case in Cathedrals and certainly in church ministry generally, that you’re given big jobs with very little detail. The call as priests and deacons, the call as lay people, is to take what we have and to stop and ponder, to say “Okay let me see what I can do here”.

So here you are St Clement’s: today marks a nativity of your very own, the occasion of your new beginning with André. You are called to welcome this very new rector and to care for him---not in a fussy or overbearing way---but in a Mary-kind of way, pondering what beautiful thing God might be calling you to. And here you are André: today marks a nativity of your own, your new beginning as rector of your first parish. You are called to tend to this community as though each

²Luke 1:26-33 *New Revised Standard Version*.

small gesture, each small act of ministry were the most beautiful thing in the world, because indeed it is.

In the coming months, you will face many more beginnings, many little nativities. May you embrace them as Mary embraced the good news of Jesus Christ, not by running in the opposite direction, but by pondering together with each new beginning where there might be beauty in what's about to take place.

Amen.