

## Advent 4 – 21<sup>st</sup> December 2025

This week, I saw a clip of Classic FM's Alexander Armstrong being asked about his favourite carol. Given two alternatives, with Hark the Herald as an option, Wesley's great anthem won every time. That was, at least, until Once in Royal came up. This then took the lead. Its harmonies and famous first verse solo make it a fond favourite for many (both being sung tonight!).

I then saw a discussion about this carol on a vicar's facebook group – yes they exist! Keep away! Clearly, there are lyrics which make some feel uncomfortable - the oft-omitted third verse. *'And through all His wondrous childhood, He would honour and obey...Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as He'.*

I wonder what these words stir for you? Originally written as a poem by Cecil Frances Alexander and published in 1848 in *Hymns for Little Children*. There's no doubt a good dose of Victorian values here and, though a popular idea, I don't think *'being good'* is a helpful way to describe the Christian vocation. John the Baptist was many things but *'mild'* is perhaps a bit of a stretch...

But I want to say something this morning about that other theme: Christian obedience. Obedience is often a term we hear pejoratively - a term for use with children or pets. Bound up with power and control. The idea that subjects *'obey'* their monarch no doubt raises the hairs on the neck of any republican. The wedding vows in the Book of Common Prayer, where the bride promises *'to love, cherish, and to obey'* in respect of her groom, are rarely chosen today.

But true Christian obedience is quite different. Understanding this can lend some theological weight to Alexander's popular carol. The Christian understanding of freedom and obedience are related here. Scripture consistently links obedience and freedom, not obedience and oppression. In Romans, Paul describes his own calling as one given *'to bring about the obedience of faith'* among the nations. Obedience here is about a trusting response to God's grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem *Stages on the Road to Freedom* discusses discipline, action, suffering and death...probably not the sorts of things we associate with freedom. But freedom, say Bonhoeffer, is *'perfected in glory'* when it's handed over to God. The great characters of our Advent journey show us just that, in obedience to God's call.

John the Baptist points away from himself and prepares the way for Jesus' coming; he says we must decrease so Jesus can increase, and of course ends up in prison thereafter. (From prison within Nazi Germany is where Bonhoeffer wrote his poem). Mary hands over her whole existence, body and soul, to give room to God. And Joseph, in today's gospel, trusts God and accepts the task given to him; he is willing to be nothing more nor less than God asks him to be – *'he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him'*. He shows courage to withstand the cultural expectations of his situation at the time and so becomes a part of God's saving work.

Contrast this with King Ahaz in our first reading. King of Judah, seven centuries before Christ's birth, in the midst of a deep political crisis and his kingdom under threat. God has told Ahaz that he has nothing to fear but Ahaz refuses to listen and trust. He is told to ask for a sign. His refusal sounds pious but it is in fact a rejection of trust. He chooses his own calculations over obedience, his own version of freedom over the freedom offered to him by God. Obedience, in the biblical sense, is not grovelling submission but turning back, listening again, allowing God to restore what has been lost.

Unlike King Ahaz, the characters of the birth narratives display humility, a willingness to listen to God, to serve and obey. We should not disregard their humanity. Mary is afraid. Joseph first intends to separate from Mary to be spared public shame. John the Baptist has doubts and unanswered questions from prison.

Their humanity reminds us that it is through our fragile, fearful, anxious and questioning condition that God chooses to work. God works in the great muddle of our lives – *'he feeleth for our sadness and he shareth in our gladness'*. We must not forget that the people of the first Christmas were just like you and me. But people who, in all their fear, anxiety and confusion, hand over their freedom to God in true obedience.

This understanding of freedom and obedience doesn't make life easy. Mary is told a sword will pierce her soul when Jesus is presented in the temple. John the Baptist's fate was gruesome. Perhaps Joseph still suffered embarrassment at the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. To serve and obey God is not to set aside who and what we are as humans to keep God satisfied. Rather it is to grow into what God calls us to be. The benedictine tradition speaks of obedience as listening – from *obedire* – to hear attentively. Obedience begins not with action, but with attentiveness to God's voice.

Advent has nearly reached its end. It presents to us a choice. We can either stand with King Ahaz, trust ourselves, and refuse God's signs. Or we can stand with Joseph in today's gospel; listen to God and attend to his call. What might that call to trust God, to hand our freedom over to God, look like for you this Christmas? What might you need to set aside or offer to God in prayer in order to be truly free and rejoice with the angels in a few days' time? Christ's obedience was not about being mild or good but trusting God the Father with his very life. As we seek to model his example, may the words of God's messengers to so many in the scriptures ring in our ears, *'Do not be afraid'*.