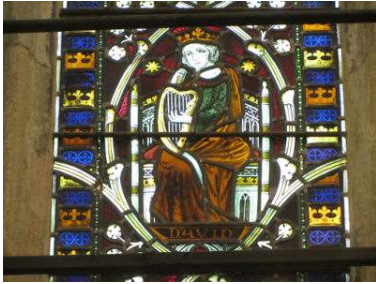


SERMON, 20 DECEMBER 2020 – 2 SAMUEL 7, LUKE 1

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



*King David from the Jesse Window at Selby Abbey*

The Sunday before Christmas, and we get the Old Testament reading about David wanting to build a temple. The ark of the Covenant, the tablets of the Law, are still in a tent. But during David's time, Israel has become a nation, the ark is no longer being moved, it needs somewhere based, somewhere special – this is the physical presence of God in the heart of their nation. I need to build a temple.

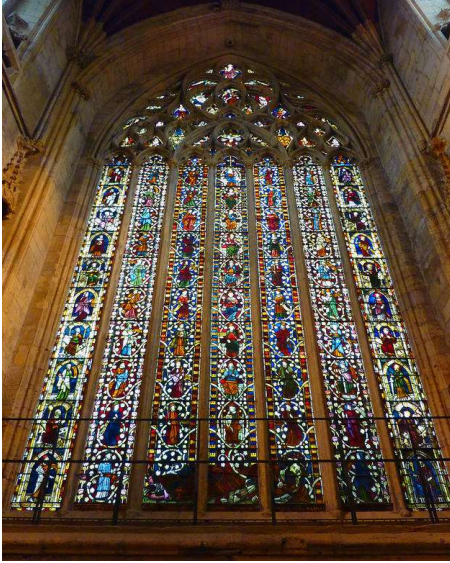
It is also a personal promise. God has been good to David. From his day as a shepherd boy, defeating Goliath, then defeating so many tribes, so many enemies – why not sit and read the whole of David's story over the next few days. God has been good, and David wants to honour God. I live in a palace, it is time to build a temple.

Nathan the prophet agrees – “do all you have in mind, for the Lord is with you”.

Then Nathan is lying in bed that night, and God speaks to him. Go and tell the King, God does not want him to build a temple. I can imagine Nathan lying there thinking, “damn, have I really got to go and tell the king that. He's not going to like it”

Perhaps the King had been up all night, drawing plans, getting excited – and Nathan is announced the following morning. He's not going to be please – but God has that sorted

Moreover the Lord declares to you, David, that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.



*Jesse Window at Selby Abbey*

So David is moved away from buildings, and told that he will be the father of a dynasty, that his line will continue. Which brings us to our Luke reading.

“A virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David”

I am no expert on Jewish family trees, but it is worth reminding ourselves that, even though Joseph wasn't actually Jesus' dad, it is his family tree that matters. You may have seen some lovely Jesse Tree windows, Jesse being David's father – showing the family tree all the way down to Joseph and then to Jesus. This is the window at Selby Minster. Jesse sleeps at the bottom, and the family grows from him.



*John William Waterhouse, 1914*

We know the story of the Annunciation, and there are so many beautiful portrayals of it.

“Do not be afraid” – you can understand why a young lady might be afraid when a strange angel turns up in her room. It is a message for us as well this year – many of us are afraid, and understandably so – a virus we cannot see,

cannot control – fear is understandable. Do not feel guilty, share your fears, and know that there are people around who will listen, support and love – and in their listening, support and love, we have God’s strength to conquer our fear.



*Leonardo da Vinci, 1472-5*

Perhaps Mary spent the next few months upbeat, excited, blooming – or perhaps there were times in the nine months of pregnancy when she was afraid of what was happening. That would help us understand why she went to Elizabeth, although as Elizabeth had only just become a mother herself she might have had a few fears herself. None of us know how much time Mary and Joseph were able to spend together before that night in a stable in Bethlehem – were there some earnest talks, discussions, debates about what they had both taken on?

The lovely thing about the Christmas story is that we know it so well that we can let our imaginations run – and relive the story, and think about the story, and just wonder. This Christmas enjoy worship from elsewhere, enjoy youtube clips from elsewhere – enjoy art and writings and music and things that make us laugh and think. This will not be the Christmas we would want, the Christmas we normally do – that is frustrating (to put it mildly). They may be times when we don’t feel like it, and that’s understandable too – but do your best.



*Fra Angelico, c1437-1446*

David would never see where his family tree was leading, but he had to trust in the long game. He had to trust that God is not just the God for now, but the God who holds the past, the present, and the future.

Mary needs to get her head round the obvious question – “how can this be since I am a Virgin?” - but she accepts Gabriel’s talk about “the power of the Holy Spirit”, and she has to trust to God for the future. Perhaps she had deep, consistent faith, and never had any doubts – but when she was on the back of a donkey trying to find somewhere to stay, or when Simeon talked about “a sword will pierce your own heart”, or when Jesus left home to start his ministry, or when she held the body of her son taken down from the cross – I wonder, how easy did she find faith?



*The Flight into Egypt – St Mary’s Ponteland*

I think that, although Joseph isn’t important in this particular story, the two of them must have made a good team. To cope with the journey, the birth, the flight into Egypt, and everything else. Thank God for Mary and for Joseph, and for God’s purposes at work. Nothing is impossible with God

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”



Last week I mentioned that my friend James Atwell had died. James was Dean of St Edmundsbury Cathedral, my boss for several years, then went on to be Dean of Winchester. At St Edmundsbury he was the driving force behind the building of the tower on the Cathedral, at Winchester he had that gorgeous, ancient Cathedral. He knew even more than David or Nathan about temples,

their building and their care – and I hope I learned something from him, even if my two temples are a bit less impressive!

Most importantly he was a man with a wonderful faith, a faith in his Lord – and that faith in Christ was his bedrock. I have been reading various obituaries, and the one I loved most was by Professor Joy Carter, the vice-Chancellor of Winchester University. It included this



“We loved the way he made the Cathedral a place of broad hospitality in which the most devoted attender or the one-off tourist were equally welcomed; the homeless person no less than the Queen, the believer and the doubter equally valued. He made it a place where an Imam and a Rabbi chant side by side. He made it a place of reflection in which hard questions could be asked. He made it a place which beat to the rhythm of the fundamentally congenial and courteous heart of Anglicanism and he was able to do so because his heart always beat to that rhythm.

I hope some of those attitudes rubbed off on me!



Here is a prayer James wrote when he was in Bury

Heavenly Father, we rejoice in the words of the messengers of Christmas; the greetings of the angel of Mary that announced she would be the mother of Christ: the song of the angels to the shepherds that told of a child born in Bethlehem. We give thanks for the human response: for the 'yes' of Mary and for the eagerness of the shepherds. But above all we give thanks for the Word made flesh in the birth of the child of Bethlehem: for the call to creation in the beginning gathered again in this holy birth. Help us with a glad 'yes' and eager hearts to answer with our lives the Christmas summons. Amen.