

Dear friends,

I am now very conscious of all the things I shall be doing for the last time before I retire. On Saturday I presided at my very last wedding ceremony, and if it had to be the last one, it couldn't have been any more perfect than the one between Lily and Daniel at All Saints East Budleigh. They were a delightful couple (Her mum Amanda is a member of the congregation), it was a large joyous congregation who sang lustily from "Shine Jesus shine" to "Ding dong merrily on high" and the "12 days of Christmas" during the signing of the register. On an average of, I'd say, three weddings a year for 23 years, I've done a few. I can't remember my first one, but it must have been as a curate in Margate, Kent, but I'll not forget my last one.

I started getting a sore back a few days ago but by Sunday morning it was so bad that I was worried about making the 8am. Communion service. I struggled through the morning services and Choral Evensong but had to miss the concert at All Saints by Andrew Millington and his great niece, Rosie Bennett in the afternoon. I was trying to ease my back in bed, but Louise got there and said it was fantastic.

Sunday 21st December – Advent 4

Robert Charles will be presiding at both services at St. Peter's in the morning and Archdeacon Trevor Jones will preside at All Saints and St. Michael's at 9.30am and 11am respectively. Jean Burrows will preside at the Christingle service at All Saints at 3pm and I will preside at the carol services at 4pm at St. Michael's and 6pm at St. Peter's.

Isaiah 7: 10-16. The prophesy from Isaiah that tells of a baby to be born of a "young woman" translated as a "virgin" in the Greek version of the New Testament. For Isaiah the significance is in the child's name not the manner of his birth. Emmanuel means "God is with us".

Romans 1: 1-7. In this extract, Paul declares the dual nature of Jesus. He is both human (born of the line of David) and divine (by resurrection from the dead). This message is therefore universally applicable so has ceased to be just a message for the Jews but a message for all mankind.

Matthew 1: 18-25. Matthew quotes from Isaiah's prophesy and applies it to Mary. It is striking in comparing Matthew's version from Luke's version of the birth narrative that Matthew's version is given from Joseph's point of view whereas Luke's version is very much from Mary's point of view.

Thought for the Day

This Sunday in the schema we are using we light the fourth candle on the Advent wreath, normally pink, to commemorate Mary's role in the story of Salvation. It is important to note that I originally went to my local Anglican church in Kent which had a strong evangelical, low-church flavour, so in their tradition Mary was hardly ever mentioned unless they absolutely had to. Despite that, I chose to be formed at an Anglo-Catholic seminary/monastery in West Yorkshire called Mirfield. This was a culture shock for me in many and various ways but one of those ways was their obvious devotion to Mary and I reacted against that initially because I'd brought all my

prejudices with me – but my journey had been started whether I liked it or not. The real gear change came for me when I went to Romania and encountered the Orthodox church and their similar veneration of Mary and the tens of thousands of icons of Mary with Jesus. This coincided with Rowan Williams as our Archbishop having a profound devotion to Mary and I bought one of his books called “Ponder these things – praying with icons of the virgin” which is now one of my most valuable possessions. Mary holding Jesus in her arms is now for me the most profound icon of the Christian faith for it speaks to our core belief – that God really and truly became a human being in Jesus – it speaks of true incarnation – that Christ is with us – Emmanuel. Ergo, Mary has become a pivotal part of the Christian faith because without her humble “Yes” the entire belief system falls. As you may or may not be aware the “Hail Mary” is also an integral part of my personal prayer life. I am not asking that anyone follows my path just signalling that I have embraced the whole breadth of belief about Mary personally from sceptic to devotee over 25 years or so, so I have no room to criticise anyone for where they stand on the question of Mary. One of the official titles of Mary used extensively in the Eastern church is “Theotokos” which is a Greek title that means “God – bearer” (Council of Ephesus – 431AD). This directly affects my spirituality and religious practice which is profoundly incarnational but that’s another story for another day.

The Prayer for Today is written by one of the greatest Christian minds ever recorded, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) and yearns to learn about, grow into and finally embrace God.

**Grant me, O Lord my God
A mind to know you
A heart to seek you
Wisdom to find you,
Conduct pleasing to you
Faithful perseverance in waiting for you
And a hope of finally embracing you.
Amen.**

Love and peace,
Martin