

4th SUNDAY OF ADVENT Year B

In 2002, in the annual Reith Lectures on the BBC, the philosopher Baroness Onora O'Neill said that our society was suffering from a crisis of trust. We just do not believe those people we used to trust in the past. We have become suspicious of our leaders, politicians, doctors, the clergy and many of the institutions and professions which are central to our society.

This is corrosive because a society needs trust to function well or else it falls apart. And, worse, people lose confidence and are afraid to take risks and to reach out to others because they have become cynical. They see in their fellow humans not virtues but their failings and vices.

Today's first reading is about trust, not so much our trust in God but God's trust in us. We are told of a political leader, King David, who wants to build a house for God. God gently puts David in his place. It is God who is the source of all blessings and will do the building. But it won't be a house in the physical sense, but rather a dynasty. David's heirs will inherit his throne. It is amazing that the Lord can show such trust in the very human beings who let him down. David was chosen by God, and in many ways did God's will, but after he had become king he abused that power by committing adultery with Bathsheba and then murdering her husband Uriah. It is the ruthless behaviour that we recognise still going on in our world. And yet God goes on trusting us.

In the Gospel today we have another story of trust. The Lord entrusts himself to his own creation. God takes on our human flesh. The young Jewish virgin Mary, betrothed to Joseph who is of David's house, is told by Gabriel that she is greatly favoured by God. She is profoundly disturbed. She is, no doubt, fearful of the demands to be made upon her, as anyone would be. Mary's life will indeed be disturbed, but so in a sense will God's. The Lord God makes himself vulnerable in his Son, taking the risk of trusting one of his creatures. The salvation of the world depends on it.

But how can Mary take such a risk ? She is told that her old, barren cousin Elizabeth is pregnant; and this reminds us of another story of divine trust which goes back to Abraham and Sarah, another woman whose barrenness was made fruitful by God. Mary had learnt, from the same scriptures that we read, the long history of the Lord who from the beginning had trusted his creatures despite the evidence of sin and failure.

Now he is committing himself again to their care. Now God is fulfilling those promises made to David – fulfilling them in her.

Mary knows the consequences of saying yes in a world that will suspect and doubt her. But she has gotten to know God, and knows that God is a trusting and reliable God. She believes that she can trust God in return, that she can take the risk and open her life to God's grace with all its upheavals. And so she trusts and says, "Let what you have said be done to me."

How can we approach the coming feast of Christmas ? It's good to find some space, some quiet even for a few minutes away from the commercial and family pressures that surround it. It would be very easy to become cynical and see the whole event as a commercial rip-off, reflecting the values and priorities of the world rather than the Gospel message.

But Mary provides a light in the darkness. She had experienced the fear of upheaval and change and family pressures. But like us she had the scriptures and prayer to turn to. She knew the story of the Lord who would not let his people be destroyed by their fear and suspicions but kept rescuing them and trusting them. He could be relied on. Now the Lord had placed his trust in her; and she returned that trust.

So as we approach this feast, a feast full of wonder and light, when, as St Paul says, we will discover in Jesus Christ "the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages", we too can take the risk, open our hearts, not be paralysed by cynicism, and ask God to take flesh in our hearts and homes this Christmas. We can return God's trust