

St James' and St Peter's Churches, Birkdale

Advent Reflections



Week 3 - Expectations

According to their website, Liverpool women's hospital is the largest single-site maternity hospital in the UK, with an average of 24 babies born a day. Leah is certainly kept busy!

Christmas of course is a celebration of a birth. Of the birth of Jesus, God-with-us Emmanuel. But midwifery, Leah would tell you, is more than just the birth, it's the care of the mother before and after the birth. The word "Midwife" means "with Woman" with them through the whole journey of motherhood, from pregnancy, through birth, to those early days with a newborn.

Thousands of expectant mothers go through the doors of the hospital each year. Many who, whilst full of nerves and uncertainty about what to expect are not long after leaving those same doors full of elation and cradling their new baby. What, I wonder, did Mary expect? In her novel, "the Birth-keeper of Bethlehem" Bridget Supple considers the very human experience of Mary. Visited by angels and carrier of the Son of God, as she spent her months feeling the baby growing, feeling every kick and worrying about every new sensation, just like any other first time mother. I wonder what she expected about birth? Had she been present at a birth before? Did she have an understanding of what it meant? Or looked like? Did she think that, because God had chosen her for this task that surely it would be different for her? I wonder what she thought when she ended up amongst the animals, in a crowded and busy city, with hay and just a feeding trough to lay the baby in? I doubt that this is what she had expected.

Expectations are tricky. We set them for ourselves, others set them for us. At Christmas who's house do you go to? Who gets a Christmas card and who doesn't? In life – who gets the promotion? Who has good health? Who's health declines? Who does God heal? Who does he not heal? Of those thousands making their way into Liverpool women's, some of their expectations will not be met. Some of them will not leave elated, and with their baby in their arms.

When expectations are not met, this is when it's hard. This is when we teeter on the very edge of our faith. Why did God not act? Why did God not heal? Why did God not intervene? I expected him to. Many would say – well, its a “test of faith” or “God will use it for good” But your wife has cancer, you have no money and you're going to loose your house – how is that good?

It's these serious and challenging questions and situations that rock us to our very core. Causing us to wrestle with our faith in a way that we hadn't before. I'm not here with an easy answer – sorry! It's one of the hardest questions of faith, and an easy answer would mean that we don't wrestle with the question, that we don't come to God with our questions or disappointments. There are times in my own spiritual journey where I have had to wrestle with some of these big questions, there are even times when I've shouted at God out of frustration. Perhaps you feel like you are wrestling with God at the moment.

When Jacob wrestled with God in Genesis 32 his life was forever changed by the encounter. It didn't sort the problem out – he still had to face up to his brother, but it did give him a different and a new perspective on what God was doing. On the cross Jesus cried out to God – my God my God why have you abandoned me! Let me tell you, God is big enough to take our shouting and our questioning! The wrestling, the shouting, the questioning – this leads us to deepen our reliance and our trust in God. Whilst we may not get an answer to the questions this side of eternity, the wrestling can help us to live our lives differently. Even if our prayers are not answered. Pete Grieg explores this in his book, God on Mute

If it begins to feel too big, like you are losing a battle, reach out for support. There are those around us who will want to support us, friends or family, the church family, those who will listen. I will listen. There are also organisations that are set up to support us. Those set up to pray with us, like the prayer line.

This advent, in the midst of our preparation and our waiting, perhaps take some time to think of your expectations of Christmas, or of life. When those expectations are met – praise

God! When they are not, don't give up, don't pass it all off as a bad job, push into God, wrestle with your faith, allow the hard times to shape and hone your reliance on God. Maybe let go of some of your expectations and instead refocus on the cross.

Mary's expectations certainly were not met in the stable, nor were they met years later when she watched her Son, the promised one, crucified. and yet, it is finished – through this, more than we could ever have expected has been made possible. Through the cross, through the unmet expectations of the messiah, the unexpected and incredible gift of life and salvation has been given.

Questions to Consider:

1. When have your expectations been met? Or not been met? How did this make you feel? How did you respond?
2. In Genesis 32 Jacob wrestles with God, Have you done this kind of wrestling? What was your experience? Did it change the way you relate to God/your faith?
3. How could we support those around us facing unmet expectations? Without resorting to clichés?
4. How does the cross shape our experiences of suffering or struggle? Does it change the way we approach hard times?
5. In 1 Peter 4, what sort of attitude does Peter encourage his readers to have about their suffering? Does this speak comfort or challenge to us?
6. What expectations might we have of God, or life that we may need to lay down, or get rid of entirely?

Resources mentioned in the video:

“The Birth-keeper of Bethlehem: A Midwife's Tale” Bridget Supple (Womancraft Publishing: 2022)

“God on Mute” Pete Greig (Kingsway Publications, 2007)

UCB Prayer line: 01782 36 3000