

9.30 PARISH COMMUNION
4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (YEAR B)
18TH - DEC-2011
ROMANS 16 : 25 - end
LUKE 2 : 1 - 20

'SEVEN MARKS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH'

4TH - faces the cost of change and growth rather than resisting change and avoiding failure

During this Advent season and as we prepare once more for Christmas we have been thinking about the seven marks of a healthy church. These aim to focus our minds on the future life and direction of St.Mary's. First, we explored how God energizes our faith and how this effects both our worship and our sacramental life. Then, we thought about having an outward focus, being rooted in the local community, making connections between faith and daily life. Also, that we may have a passion for justice and peace.

Last Sunday Sheila reminded us that it is essential that we understand what God wants for us and for His Church. And we begin this process by praying to God as well as for each other. Today, we consider the fourth mark that a healthy church "faces the cost of change and growth rather than resisting change and avoiding failure." *"faces the cost of change and growth rather than resisting change and avoiding failure."*

Change happens whether we like it or not. We are not the same people in the same place we were five, ten, twenty years ago. There is much we have to thank God for. However, there are also the challenges, and the questions areas that we are finding difficult to maintain. Where are the future people of God, who will care for the church when we are no longer able to do so? How do we engage with a society that largely ignores us and a culture that considers us as irrelevant?

Today we are reminded in the Gospel Reading that a young teenager called Mary became the mother of Jesus. She was probably quite poor and vulnerable. Perhaps, Mary could have responded by, resisting the scary changes to her life, ignoring the message, hoping that it will never happen. By saying "No" to God. Instead she is filled with praise, not despair. She had a trusting faith in God that all would be well.

What an example to us all as we face uncertain futures, or problems that seem bigger than our ability to cope. Mary is able to hear God's call above the noise and clutter of her fears, which so easily could have overwhelmed her. Mary hears God telling her that she will be blessed, God's words are 'good news'. That message is for us this and every Christmas time, God speaks to us that we need not fear, God loves us and is with each one of us.

In a world of constant change and uncertainty, perhaps, we feel more secure if there is something in our lives we can hold onto. So, perhaps, we want our Church and our faith to remain the same. However, it seems to me that we have two alternative courses of action. We can either fight change, ignore it, or pretend it will go away. This means that the inevitable results will be forced upon us. Or, we can be more positive in accepting change and therefore have some control about what happens.

St. Mary's should be, and could be, a church that bows to the richness of its past, but is not bound by it and dares to look into the future. This may mean taking risks and admitting to when things are not working. Learning from the experience without recrimination. A church that is alert and responds to the challenges that face it and the community where we live. Where any change however small, or scary, is affirmed and developed.

In these ways we say "Yes" to God accepting the hurts and the challenges, and how this sometimes makes us feel uncomfortable. In these ways we begin to know God, His constant assurance, and His affirming blessing. Yes, we will ponder these things deeply and we will often be perplexed, anxious to the very heart of our being. This Christmas we will look at the Baby Jesus in the manger with wonder and joy, but will we be willing to pick up the child, to hold Him in our embrace and present, afresh Christ to the World?

This Christmas may we enjoy the familiar thanking God for His goodness and love. Following the example of Mary may we also ponder the message of our Christian faith and how God may use us in this place, at this time. This Christmas may the peace of Christ still our restless spirit and allow the voice of God to be heard speaking to each one of us.

Let us Pray

Heavenly Father, who chose the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the Mother of the promised Saviour: fill us your people with your grace, that in all things we may embrace your holy will and with her rejoice in your Salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**