Lord, what we know not teach us, and what we are not make us, in Jesus’s name AMEN.

Well the waiting is over - on Wednesday last week we heard the good news that the first woman bishop has been appointed. The diocese of Manchester has got there first, and if most of us had not heard of the Revd Libby Lane before the announcement, maybe that’s just a sign that God is doing new things in unexpected places, as he always is. And here we are - nearly through the season of Advent, the waiting nearly over – trying to get ourselves straight in readiness for the coming of the Saviour - with the focus this morning in our readings on the figure of Mary. Mary is centre stage for us this morning, and we feel for her as momentous and unexpected news comes to her about her future.

I see three things in our readings this morning: I see a person waiting attentively on God for the message he gives; I see confusion and perplexity and trust in the face of it; and I see praise as the response of the grateful heart. Attentiveness, trust and praise - three aspects of the gospel of the good news of Jesus Christ.

First then a word about attentiveness, about the attentive listening to God

Mary is open to hear the word of the Lord. She is not so busy that she has no time to listen to what the voice of God is saying to her. She is attentive. However you picture the annunciation, she is attentive to the God who is speaking to her from within, her ears and heart are attuned to a message that is coming to her spirit and to her inner being. So there is something inward in this passage, something about waiting on God in quietness, something about openness to what God may be saying to us, about the God within us who is the ground of our being.

For me to mention being quiet and still may have you asking - what planet am I living on? Don’t I know it’s Christmas, the time to be frantic? Well I live in the real world too. And the idea of sitting still in a room, which some have thought to be the highest state we can reach, of listening to the voice within, is of supreme practical importance to us, because it creates a space within and around us, and therefore creates freedom and momentum. Let me just recommend for any of you seeking an inner stillness a little book called Into the Silent Land by Martin Laird. It is quite short but its wisdom in pursuit of stillness for our inner being is unsurpassed. A stocking filler, perhaps, even at this late stage.

How might we be attentive more widely? Being attentive in this Cathedral might involve a fuller understanding of our shared identity: that we are a church, yes, and so much more than a church; that we are a place where people work and are paid; and also a place where people volunteer, thank God, and are not paid; a place with a distinctive capability and reputation for reconciliation, a brand value, as marketing people would say, of exceptional power; with the result that as a community we are not easily classifiable either as a greater church or as a business but are an amalgam of different organic parts working under the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Attentiveness might have us asking what this amalgam implies for our working together; and what instruments and supports and encouragements might be appropriate for the different
parts and for the whole. What would make our synergy strong? And by the way, may I thank all of you, each and every one of you, who have helped me over the past couple of months to a better understanding of the different parts of this great Cathedral and how they fit together. And thank you to those who have called for more prayer and make more prayer here.

**Now secondly to confusion and trust**

I wonder if, like me, you are often confused. You’re picking up signals that are contradictory. Jack is telling you one thing and you’re listening intently and you’re making sense of it, and then Jill is giving you a quite different version of the same situation; you can make sense of that too; but put the two stories together and you’re feeling confused. How can you make sense of the whole thing? Remember the wise saying that ‘If you’re not confused, you don’t know what’s going on.’ If you’re not confused you don’t know what’s going on.

When Mary hears the word of the Lord, we read that she was very perplexed. She was confused, bewildered, mystified and also rather nervous. This young girl, faced with a message from God that she is really special, feels confused; and the confusion rises when she gets the news that she is to be the person to bear the saviour of the world, a child who will be ‘holy... **Son of God**’. And this, not in the ordinary way children are conceived, but by the action of the living God. No wonder she is confused.

What Mary then hears are words of assurance - ‘**Do not be afraid**’. Have no fear. Or to put it more positively: **Be confident and trusting.** Be confident in the Lord who has favoured you, who will look after you, who has entrusted to you the greatest task in the world, to bear the son of God, and who will look after you in that. So Mary is to trust that **the good purposes of the living God will be the answer to her confusion.** ‘**Let it be with me according to your word**’. That is Mary’s response of trust. When we are confused - when different narratives and factors and life events point in different directions - we are to trust that the God who holds all these things in his hand will be holding us there too.

**And finally to the role of praise**

We mustn’t get ahead of ourselves and anticipate Mary’s great Song of Praise, the Magnificat, though we know it comes as the very next part of the gospel of Luke, and that Mary is a person of praise who in her Magnificat will be asking God to enlarge his presence in her. She knows - and we know - that praise of God and praise to God is immensely liberating. It sets us free to trust. Giving praise and glory to God is the message of the last three verses of the letter to the Romans, our first reading.

How can praise help? I owe to the great American OT scholar Walter Brueggemann some insights into the nature of praise (see **Praise and the Psalms - a politics of glad abandonment**).

What praise can enable us to do is to see things differently, to imagine a different reality. When I am praising, I am not belly-aching. When I am praising God, I am leaving little room for arrogance or egoism. Then praise is like poetry in the sense that it resists a closed meaning. It leaves things open in respect, awe and astonishment, and because of its openness and ambiguity it has a power to heal by creating an imaginative space in front of us. It is bold and audacious: to make a joyful noise in the presence of God means being not passive but sending traffic upstream to God with whom our relationship is celebrated and improved. To praise God is an act of basic trust because we know him as ‘the other’ to be unreservedly reliable and available. It is, as Brueggemann says, not self-assertion but ‘glad self-abandonment’ in which God is everything to us, we praise him out of a buoyant confidence; and what we do when we give God the
glory is that we gratefully cede everything to him. When we give God the glory we are rejecting every rival claim, every rival system, every rival call on our loyalty.

The wonderful thing about praise viewed in this multi-dimensional way is that it can help resolve our personal dilemmas, our family situations, our workplace identities, and can be of huge value in realising the vision for this place - as people of praise handing over our life to God. And by the way, you don’t have to be a genius to see that an attitude of praise to God can spill over into an attitude of praise towards others, with similar benefits.

In the countdown to Christmas let us make time to be *attentive* to the God who loves us, and to the signs of his presence around us. Let us *trust* in God to make sense of our confusions. And let us develop and show an attitude of *praise*. In some such way as this, we may be able to recover a sense of calm and strength such as the Lord called his prophets to encourage and proclaim when he said to them: *Comfort my people* – help them to *breathe more easily*. With this strength and calm we may be ready to pursue our purpose and set out afresh on the great Christian adventure.

‘*To the only wise God be glory and praise for ever and ever.’*

Amen