



Dear friends,

I write on Advent Sunday, filled with a day of worship focusing on 'hope' and on living with urgency as God's people in God's world. I write mindful of the uncertainty which surrounds us. Uncertainty still being created by Covid-19, uncertainties in our personal lives, uncertainties on a national and global stage. I write aware of the time I have missed with you as I, and my family, have recovered from Covid-19, and I know that the loss I feel is small in comparison to so many greater losses others are living with. I write anticipating time spent with others in the Circuit 'Walking Backwards to Christmas', as some of us read Stephen Cottrell's book of the same name, alone or together. I write looking forward to sharing with others in prayer as we use the Circuit prayer diary, this year offering us snatches of Luke's early chapters through Advent and Christmas. And, of course, it won't be long before we trip over an angel or two...and we hear their unmistakable words:

"Do not be afraid..."

I have been blessed in the past month to spend time on retreat, 'Waiting on the Word'. It was a gift of time and community, and I'll tell you about it some time if you ask. But, for now, I just share one fragment of conversation. We had been reflecting on an image of the annunciation...Mary, and Gabriel...

"I wonder what it would be like" I said, "I wonder what it would be like, if woven into our everyday greetings and leave-takings, just like 'God be with you' (Goodbye), were the words 'do not be afraid'?"

"It would be awful!" she said. "Just like when at school they used to say 'I want a word with you'...I mean, just think about what the angels say next. They always have some terrifying instruction to follow..."

In true Mary-style, I have been 'pondering' these words in my heart. And, despite the challenge which almost always follows from the angels, I am still convinced that we need to say more often to one another (though rarely literally!) 'do not be afraid'.

Fear is all around us: fear of the future; fear of 'the other', the person or people who are different from us; fear of our own failings and shortcomings. And yet God says to us, time and again, in so many different ways, 'do not be afraid'. Though life is uncertain, though you do not know the time of my coming, though you may face great challenges, though I may ask great things of you – 'do not be afraid'. And we in our turn say 'do not be afraid' to one another as we smile at a stranger, as we share what we have with those in need, as we speak words of challenge with love, as we offer help as someone struggles with a task, as we face a particular reality with courage and confidence... 'do not be afraid'.

Peace, Jo

Holy God
As we journey through this Advent time
May we hold courage and hope
for those caught by fear.
May we bear your light
in those places where darkness shrouds possibility.
May we stand as signs of your love
in all the places where we are.
In the name of Jesus
Word made flesh
Emmanuel
Amen