

**Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

**Mary – the handmaid of the Lord**

**Readings:** 1 Sam 2:1-10 Luke 1:26-38,

Today, with the story of the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary we can feel we really are getting nearer to Christmas. Our readings in Advent have pointed us on the one hand to God and his big over-arching story of salvation and on the other they have introduced us to the significant individuals who were an essential part of that plan. Today that person is Mary, the one chosen to be the mother of Jesus. It's a bit like a collection of coins. We don't use 'real' money much anymore do we, but if you look at anything from a 10 cent piece to a 2 dollar coin you will see on one side ? - the head of the sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, and on the other a variety of significant images. So today we are going to look at what our readings tell us about God's big plan of salvation, and then we will focus in on the story from Mary's perspective and finally ask what we might learn from her example that will help us live as Jesus' followers today.

First let us pray.

### **Prayer**

Lord take these words of mine and make them your words. Please use them to challenge and encourage us in our Christian walk. Draw us closer to yourself and renew us in your image, we pray. Amen

### **God's story**

When I am teaching my students how to read the Bible well, I try to drill into them the importance of context, context, context – where is the passage and why is it there? The angel's visit to Mary comes at the beginning of Luke's Gospel where he introduces us to Jesus and helps us to see how the NT stories about Jesus are linked back to God's promises in the OT. Last week John gave us a vivid picture of John the Baptist, the forerunner sent to prepare the way for Jesus and just before we read of the Angel Gabriel visiting Mary, we have the account of what happened when Gabriel appeared to John's father Zechariah.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth reminds us of other women in the OT who were childless until God intervened. Sarah the wife of Abraham and Hannah whose song was our OT reading are two examples. But how does Mary fit into this pattern? She is a young woman engaged to be married and there is no suggestion that she could not have borne her first child without divine intervention. Well, Gabriel's words of greeting: "Rejoice, favoured one," may have stirred her to remember Zephaniah 3:14-15 (Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem.); Zechariah 9:9 (Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout Daughter Jerusalem!) or Joel 2:21 (Do not be afraid, land of Judah; be glad and rejoice. Surely the Lord has done great things!). Joel Green suggests that what is happening here is that Mary in some way is regarded as a representative of the Jewish nation as a whole; it is not so much that she is in need of a child but rather that Israel is in need of the child that she will bear.

Indeed, the angel's next words: "The Lord is with you," are much more than a greeting. In the OT these are words that are used when a person is chosen by God for a special purpose in salvation history - like Moses or Jeremiah. No wonder Mary was 'greatly troubled' - she was wondering what was coming next. What would she be called on to do? It soon becomes clear when Gabriel announces that she will give birth to a son who will be "great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

This is clear Messianic language, a rolling together of all the OT promises of God, as yet unfulfilled, to deliver his people. And it's not just from oppressive rule of Romans, for the child is named Jesus because he will deliver his people from their sins; Israel will at last be brought back into a right relationship with God. As we read on in Luke-Acts we see that story unfolding – although Jesus will be a Messiah unlike their expectations and he will bring freedom from sin and restored relationships not just for the Jews but for all people, not by powerful conquest but by means of the cross.

Mary's response is quite simple: How will this be? We need to remember that at that time there was no expectation that the Messiah would be born of a virgin so it could be that all Mary was asking was will the baby be born as a result of my marriage to Joseph or what? The angel's reply is mind blowing:

“The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” It is one of those answers that gives rise to even more questions and there is certainly enough theology in there to keep us occupied to Christmas and beyond!

You know, as western thinkers we often want to know how this works out in terms of genetics and DNA but that’s missing the point. You may remember that last week John told us that although the Temple had been rebuilt both the ark of the covenant and the shekinah glory were missing. The shekinah glory was the visible sign of God’s presence with his people. When Gabriel describes the Holy Spirit’s overshadowing it reminds us of both the Spirit’s hovering over the earth at creation and suggests the Spirit is now present in what will be a new creation; and also that instead of a cloud overshadowing the temple, that symbol of God’s presence is not linked to a building, the temple, but to a person – the baby who is to be born. From now on God’s presence with his people will Immanuel, God with us, the baby in the manger, the Word made flesh.

But now, let’s flip the coin, so to speak and look at the story from Mary’s perspective.

### **Mary**

It is said that Catholics exalt and venerate Mary above what is merited biblically while Protestants give her less esteem and respect than is her due as one who is called “Blessed among women.” (Luke 1:42) That may be an exaggeration but when I was preparing this sermon and looking at commentaries and Bible dictionaries very few had much to say about this young girl who plays such a pivotal role in the outworking of God’s plan of salvation.

So who was she and what can we learn from her? Well, Mary, or Miriam as she was probably known, is a young teenager growing up in the hill town of Nazareth about 70 miles from Jerusalem. It was not a very prepossessing town – ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ asks Nathanael. We know little about her family except that she was related to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and was most likely a descendant of King David. At the time we meet her she would have been about 13 or 14 and was betrothed to Joseph a local craftsman. Betrothal was a more serious commitment than an engagement. It involved the payment of a dowry and could only be dissolved through divorce. It usually lasted a year after which the marriage ceremony took place and the couple would begin to live together

So, Mary is living quietly in Nazareth. She has every expectation of marrying Joseph, settling down, having a family, and following the normal pattern of village life. Then her world is suddenly turned upside down; an angel appears.

Angels are pretty impressive beings so it is no wonder that Mary is greatly troubled, especially as his greeting recalls God’s call to other OT individuals who had been specially chosen to fulfill his purposes. It is no wonder that she wondered what kind of greeting this might be – what did God have in mind for her? Was she excited? Maybe. Was she scared – well definitely apprehensive.

As we have seen, Mary is told that she will miraculously conceive and bear a son; she will be the mother of the Messiah. This may have been the dream of every Jewish girl, but for Mary it calls many things into question. Very sensibly she asks: how? Note that this is not the same response as Zechariah, a priest and a godly man but who doubted God’s word even as he was burning incense on God’s altar! He cannot quite believe what he is hearing and asks: How can I be sure of this? But Mary accepts what the angel has said, she just wants to know how: How will this be? The angel has explained and gives her the double reassurance of a sign – Elizabeth’s pregnancy – followed by the words: “With God, nothing is impossible.” But for us the question remains: How will Mary respond?

As one commentator has said: All creation waits for her answer. And history is changed as she utters those memorable words: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word.” Praise God!

### **Mary – a strong woman of God.**

It’s easy to take these words and to think of Mary as a one-dimensional figure: quiet, meek and acquiescent, but I want to suggest that her reply to God indicates a depth of faith and strength of character rather than mere submission. Mary the Christ-bearer is strong and courageous, a woman of

faith steeped in the Scriptures with a passion to see God's reign re-established that far outweighs any concerns for her own reputation and future standing.

Often we are a bit suspicious of strong women but Mary would have to be strong to face all the challenges that would come to her. Mary was a woman in a highly patriarchal society and knows that she will face questions from Joseph, her own family and her village community about the child she is carrying. Indeed Joseph doesn't seem to believe her story and has decided to divorce her until he receives his own revelation from God in a dream. It takes courage to follow God in the face of the criticism and disbelief of others.

Mary's 'yes' to God indicated a strong and deep faith in God, the Mighty One, to sustain her despite a recognition of her own lowly estate. Her song, which we know as the Magnificat, closely resembles Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2. It shows us that Mary understands the ways in which God has worked in the past with the humble and weak and done great things for them and through them. She wants to be part of that story and she has a firm belief that God is more than able to sustain her.

For myself, I think she shows courage in taking on the responsibility to raise this special child. Those of us who are parents may well remember how we felt looking at our new baby, particularly the first, and thinking what an awesome responsibility we have taken on and wondering whether we will be equal to the task. How much more so for Mary!

There will be more challenges for her to face as she goes through life. She has to hear the prophetic word through Simeon that a sword would pierce her heart. She loses Jesus for 3 days when he stays behind in the Temple. She has to let him go when he starts his ministry and she worries about what is happening to him. Finally, of course, she is with Jesus as he suffers and dies on the cross. I say finally, but in fact she joins with the rest of the disciples after the resurrection and is an integral part of the early church.

Mary is a woman of strong faith and courage but she is not drawing on her own strength. When Gabriel greets Mary he uses a word that in our Bibles is often translated as: 'highly favoured' but it could also be translated as 'filled with grace.' Note: this is not so that she will be able to dispense grace or favour to others but that she has received grace from God that will sustain her for what lies ahead. God equips those he calls.

### **Lessons from Mary**

So, what can we learn from Mary?

Briefly I want to suggest 5 things.

1. She knew her Bible and she knew her God.

The people that know their God shall be strong and shall do exploits.

2. She trusted God even when she didn't fully understand what was going on. That meant she could step out in faith instead of being held back by fear.

3. She didn't focus on her own lowly position in life or her own inadequacies, but looked to God to equip and use her.

4. She was obedient and available to do God's will, to play her part in God's plan to reach out to all people. 'Here am I send me' said Isaiah; 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord' says Mary. Our response is just as important as Mary's. Will we say yes, to whatever God is asking us to do today; and it doesn't have to be something big. Life is often made up of little things.

5. Lastly she was a woman of joyful praise who expressed her own personal testimony to God's goodness in song: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.' Or as our modern song says "Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord" May our songs and carols at this Christmastime be a joyful witness to the goodness of our God.

Tom Wright says: "Mary is the supreme example of what always happens when God is at work by grace through human beings. God's power from outside, and the in-dwelling spirit within, together result in things being done which would have been unthinkable in any other way."