

Mary discovers she is having a baby

Mary has been described “the best supporting character” in the greatest drama ever played on the stage of history, the drama of which Jesus was the star.

Unfortunately we know so little about her.

The first time she appears on the stage of history she is engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.

In Jewish society in those days engagement was much more serious than in our society. In first-century Palestine engagement was quite as binding as marriage itself. Should the fiancée die, the girl would have been regarded a widow.

Mary had probably not even reached her teens. She would still have been living at home in Nazareth with her parents.

It was in the sixth month of her cousin Elizabeth’s pregnancy that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. Mary, so the angel says, deserves God’s favour. That is how he begins his message.

Why Mary?

Was she, for instance, particularly devout? Or warm-hearted and loving? Or was she wiser than all the others? Braver?

We have no answer to that.

What is true of Mary, is true of us all. God’s choosing us is mere grace. And grace is always undeserved.

No wonder Mary is much perplexed as the texts says.

The particular favour that Mary is to experience is that she will conceive and give birth to a son, whom she will name Jesus. He will be great, and he will be called the son of the most high... What an amazing message.

Every woman may believe that her firstborn is to be special, but with Mary’s child this was different. He is to be the Messiah who they all had been waiting for. He would free God’s oppressed people.

Mary’s first thought however, is not about her son, but about the fact that she is to give birth: How, she asks, can this be? I am a virgin. I do not have a man.

For a girl in Mary’s time and of Mary’s age a child before she moved in with Joseph was unthinkable.

And Gabriel is not to explain, he simply assigns all responsibility of what happens to Mary to God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you...

The same spirit that was active in the creation of the world.

And just to affirm all this, Gabriel mentions the miracle that had happened to Elizabeth. She was old and infertile, and yet at the point when the angel came to Mary, Elizabeth was already six months pregnant.

Nothing, Gabriel says, will be impossible with God.

And Mary – she accepts God’s will for her life.

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

In one sense she must have recognised that she did not have any option. And yet Mary was not a puppet on a string.

She could have rejected God’s calling on her life.

Instead she says her “Yes” to God’s plan. And the angel departs.

Every year on the fourth Sunday of Advent, this story is suggested to the preacher to talk about and reflect on.

So what do we do with it?

What comes to us through the text?

What speaks to us?

Which themes does it hold in store?

First of all I discover in the story God's extraordinary ability to surprise us. Nothing will be impossible with God. These words sum up the whole life that Jesus will later live. The life that began as a miracle – a virgin birth – was full of miracles later: the feeding of 5000, or realistically 20000 at least... the turning water into wine, the healing of the sick and the raising of the dead, and above all Jesus' own resurrection.

With God all these impossible acts become possible. And the ascension of Jesus did not mark the end of God's mighty acts among his people. Luke tells us in the book of acts how God continues to work miracles among Jesus' followers. And if we just look around we still discover how God involves himself in his world.

The challenge I think, is a challenge to our own expectations.

The degree to which God can surprise us, is the degree to which we give room to the spirit to work in our lives and in our churches.

(pause)

A second theme I discover is that of grace.

God in his grace chose Mary to be the mother of our Lord.

Nothing is said by Luke about Mary's virtues, or about her weaknesses. Mary was just an ordinary girl. But this is precisely something that can be found often in the Bible: God uses the ordinary people.

As God in his grace called Mary to serve his purposes, so God calls us, too.

God is not looking for us to prove ourselves before he calls us; rather, our task is to prove ourselves and give our best once he has called us.

(pause)

Closely following the theme of grace is the theme of faith.

Mary's response to the grace of God was a sign of faith: Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.

Mary was willing to trust God, whatever happened.

She was willing to believe that God could use her, however inadequate she may have felt.

What was true of Mary, needs to be true of us.

We too, need to be willing to respond to the call of God in our own lives, whatever that may be, and however inadequate we may feel.

Responding in faith involves risk... It involves handing over our lives and our future to God.

(pause)

Finally there is the theme of obedience. Mary's acceptance of God's call upon her life was leading to shame and disgrace. That is how things were in those days. Mary's neighbours would undoubtedly have been rejecting Mary as soon as they

heard that she was expecting a baby while she was still only engaged. And all the more if they learned that Joseph was not the father...

Following God's call surely does not make you anyone's darling, not then and not today.

We have to risk loneliness and pain. And we have to carry our crosses, just as Jesus did, and as Mary saw him do...

(pause)

Overwhelmed by the fact that God has chosen her to be the mother of his son, Mary then turned to think of her child to be.

Like any other mother, Mary dreamed of great things for her son.

Enormous dreams she had.

And little did she know about what it really meant that all generations would be blessed...

Inspired by the visit of the angel and his message that her son would be the Messiah, Mary sang of the coming revolution of which her son would be the leader. The powerful would be brought down from their thrones, and the lowly lifted up, the hungry would be filled with good things, and the rich being sent away.

So certain was Mary of the coming revolution that she spoke of the future as if it had already arrived. The very fact that God was causing her to conceive a baby was in itself a sign that the revolution had already started.

Mary was a child of her time, and so, too, were her dreams.

The hopes she expressed were very much the popular hopes of the day.

The coming Messiah was going to be a powerful political figure who would restore the fortunes of the people of God. This is what Mary seriously expected, and so did many others with her. But instead of Jesus putting down the mighty from their thrones, they put him down. Jesus had come to bring about a spiritual revolution, yes. But he did not redistribute wealth and become a worldly king. In this sense Mary was wrong.

But, precisely because of the value that Jesus gave to the poor and the marginalized throughout his ministry, we believe that the world of politics and economics must be of concern to us Christians. Jesus calls us to side with the nobodies of this world and leads us to the little nobody there, outside the comfort zone, away in a manger....

The revolution that Mary sang about, and that Jesus started still needs to go on because we believe...

...that God hopes and works for a world
where all shall be included in the feast of life,
and that in Christ we see how costly it is
to bring that world about.

We believe that God's strategy for a new world
is to put the poorest first,
and that nothing is more important for God's people
than to bring the poor good news.

We believe that rich and poor alike

can be generous, wise and creative
because all are made in God's image,
and that all are made poorer when they are left out.
We believe that loving our neighbours
means working for justice,
so that all have a say in what happens to them.
We believe that God made the good earth
to sustain and delight us,
and that we are called to take care of it and enjoy it.
We believe that the God of all creation
is at work beyond all boundaries we set,
making common cause with all who wish to belong.

We long for a time
when the meek shall inherit the earth
and all who hunger and thirst after justice
shall be satisfied,
and we believe that, despite the persistence of evil,
now is always the time
when more good can be done
and we can make a difference.
Amen.

Let us remain a few moments in silence...

And now let us sing as Mary did:
Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord... MH 200