

Advent 4 2018

Although Nazareth was off the beaten track and a sleepy enough place, Mary's experience ranged far beyond the confines of the little village. There is a bustle about her going 'with haste' to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah. She travelled to Bethlehem for the census and after that to Egypt. Every year, Joseph and Mary went up to Jerusalem. She went to Capernaum with Jesus and his disciples (Jn.2:12) and was back again in Jerusalem for the fateful days of the Passion (Jn.19:25-27). The last we hear of her in the New Testament, she is in the Upper Room with the apostles, some other women and the brothers of Jesus united in prayer (Acts 1.14)

Mary had the ability to take swift and decisive action. She went 'with haste' to visit Elizabeth. To some extent she joined her son in his ministry. She goes with the group to Capernaum and Jerusalem. The Gospel of Luke notes the thoughtful, reflective aspect of Mary. On two occasions, he describes her mulling over the whole thing in her mind as she went about her life. It is not difficult to imagine her dressed in a tunic of undyed wool. Hands and fingers roughened from years of work in the fields. The whole village would help out in times of planting, weeding, gleaning, picking. Her face would be burnt brown, lined and worn by the sun and hard work. Her face would have reflected many an emotion. Tense with fear on the flight to Egypt, calm in repose, warm in love, cross with anxiety when they found the child in Jerusalem, her eyes bright as a button, alert, intelligent, flashing with humour or outrage.

The announcement to Mary sets up a parallel to John's birth. A simple calmness rules the exchange between Mary and Gabriel. While Zechariah was in the midst of activity before the whole nation in the Temple, this announcement comes to the future child-bearer privately. Had we designed these events, pomp and circumstance probably would have attended the announcement and birth of Jesus, but God chose to use an average young woman and to announce his intentions in private. The fulfilment of God's promise came to earth in an unadorned package of human innocence, without any pomp, far away from any palace. The promised one entered human life at the level of everyday experience with everyday people. God again takes the initiative when he sends Gabriel to Galilee, a region some forty-five to eighty-

five miles north of Jerusalem. God's announcement comes to a betrothed virgin, Mary. God will bring an unexpected addition into her family and a life changing dimension to her life.

Betrothal in the ancient world was part of a two-stage marriage process. The initial phase, the betrothal involved a formal, witnessed agreement to marry and the giving of a bridal price. At this point the bride legally became the groom's and could be called his wife. About a year later the actual marriage followed and the husband took his wife home. In the first century betrothal could take place starting at the age of twelve. Mary's age is unknown but it is during this betrothal stage that Gabriel breaks the news.

Mary's chaste character is highlighted by the description of her as a *virgin*. It is clear that the account attributes Jesus' origins to the Holy Spirit but the human connection with the house of David, the royal line, is important for it seems that this connection is attributed to Joseph and comes to Jesus through him. Joseph need not be the biological father in order to pass such lineage on to Jesus. The virgin birth is one mark of superiority for Jesus over John the Baptist as it makes Jesus totally unique. The only other person to have had such a direct divine intervention in his birth was Adam.

The portrait Luke paints of Mary is significant. She is a model believer, taking God at his word. In contrast to Zechariah, she is favoured of God, thoughtful, obedient, believing, worshipful and a faithful follower of God's law. It must be emphasized, however, that despite all these qualities, God's choice of Mary to bear this child springs from his grace, not from any inherent merit that she possesses. She is the object of God's unmerited, graciously provided goodness. Her description as one who has found "*favour with God*", makes it clear that God has acted on her behalf and not because of her. In fact, Mary is totally perplexed by the sudden announcement. She did not ask for or seek this role in God's plans but God has simply stepped into her life and brought her into his service, as He sometimes does with us.

Mary has difficulty comprehending the announcement. She asks, "*How will this be?*" She knows she cannot yet have conceived a child, since she is a virgin. The answer comes in terms of God's creative overshadowing power. Mary's faith is put on the line at the start. Will she believe that God has the capacity to create

life within her? God does not leave her alone in the decision. The angel notes the life that is stirring within the womb of an elderly relative, Elizabeth. The angel puts it quite simply. *"Nothing is impossible with God."* Mary simply responds in humble acceptance, *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."*

We can only imagine what this announcement required of Mary, especially as her condition became obvious. A hint of the issue it raised is in the story of Joseph's dilemma in Matthew 1:18-25.

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"*

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus."

Is God's power such that he can create life and exercise sovereignty over it? This is a question Jesus' birth should raise. Would people believe the claims surrounding Jesus? The questions are profound. Wonderful things come in surprising packages, but they do come because God has the power to deliver them.

It is these qualities that have placed Mary at the height of Christian devotion and is almost certainly the reason why so many churches, like ours, are dedicated in her name, and that is why she is the centre of our thoughts on this the Fourth Sunday of Advent. If you know the words of the Hail Mary,

please feel free to join in with me, as they sum up very precisely the role that Mary plays in salvation history.

Hail Mary, full of grace.

The Lord is with thee.

*Blessed art thou amongst women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

Holy Mary, Mother of God,

pray for us sinners,

now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.