

## Mary

Reading: Luke 1: 26 - 38

Well I'm sure many of us will have experienced at one time or another one or more of those life changing moments; you know the kind of moment after which life is never quite the same again? And often these things happen when we least expect them; some we very much welcome and embrace - yet others can be very hard for us to cope with.

Well, in today's gospel reading Mary, the mother of Jesus certainly has a life-changing moment; and one which means her life will never be the same again. And it happened one day in a rather nondescript village called Nazareth. At the time it was only a small place of about 400 people, so everyone knew everyone else. And in many ways it was the sort of place where things went on much the same year after year without anything really significant happening. But then it did. An angel appeared to a teenage girl called Mary.

Now Mary was probably fifteen years old when this happened and about to be married to a man called Joseph when she turned sixteen. And like other young women of the time she probably expected nothing in life but to be a good wife to Joseph and a mother to whatever children God blessed her with in due time.

And so it all came as rather a shock, to put it mildly - and very different from all those religious paintings in which Mary is portrayed as being all very calm and serene when the angel appears. From the way that Luke tells the story it seems to me not like that at all; she is frightened and troubled by it - 'thoroughly shaken' says the Message translation - and who wouldn't be. There you are - and suddenly - there's an angel. And not just any angel - it was an archangel - the Angel Gabriel, an angel with the honour of standing in the very presence of God himself.

'Don't be afraid' says Gabriel. And those words 'Don't be afraid' is something we hear God saying time and time again throughout the Scriptures. And for us today, I think there are times when we may sense God might be asking something of us and we can get quite fearful and worked up about it - fearful of taking that next step - fearful of the changes it may make to our lives - fearful of whatever it may mean. But it seems to me, from the way we are told repeatedly in God's word not to be afraid, that the Lord clearly does not want our minds to be clouded by fear in these situations. It brings to mind some well-known words from the Old Testament book of Isaiah where God says:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."

Well back to Mary, and the angel tells her that she's going to have a baby - - - not quite the sort of thing you want to hear when you are about to get married is it?

And I don't think we can even begin to imagine the shock and impact all this must have had upon her, especially when you think of the culture that she lived in. Well we don't know how long all this took to register with Mary and to catch her breath - but she does have the presence of mind to suggest to the angel that he may have just overlooked something - a rather significant biological problem: "Well how's this all going to happen since I'm a virgin?" And the Gabriel tells her that it will be through the agency of the Holy Spirit who will overshadow her and that the child that she we will bring to birth will be called 'the Son of God.'

I can imagine the thoughts that must have been going through Mary's mind as she listens to what the angel has to say. "I'm not sure about all this. How am I going to explain it? Nobody's going to believe me when I try and tell them. What about Joseph – how is he going to react? What am I going to tell my mum? What am I going to tell my dad? - Lord, is this really the direction you have for my life that my life should be permanently marked by scandal and shame, the shame of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, is this what you really intend for my life God?"

But then despite all the thoughts and fears that must have been going through her mind this is how she responds: This is what she says: "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." In other words: "Yes Lord I am willing to accept all that for you." And even though it will have horrendous implications for her, Mary willingly submits to what God is asking of her.

And doesn't that say something to us today about our Christian discipleship – and that is willingly submitting to God's purposes for our lives. "I am the Lord's servant" says Mary "May it be to me as you have said."

And we see the same principle of being a servant operating in the life of Jesus. "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" says Jesus. "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve." And then, of course, in the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus is acutely aware that he about to be abused, tortured and murdered - yet in intense communion with his Father he prays – "If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." And we see this whole theme of submission running like a thread throughout the whole of the New Testament.

And for us as Christians today – when we confess Jesus as Lord it means precisely that – that he is our Lord and King and that we are submitting to his rule and authority in our lives. It means we hand over the steering wheel of our lives to the Master.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams says this. Following Jesus 'assumes that we are willing to travel to where the Master is, to follow where the Master goes. And...where the Master goes is very frequently not where we would have thought of going, or would have wanted to go.'

And the Christian understanding of submission also extends to our relationships with others. The Apostle Paul in his New Testament letter to the Philippians encourages his readers to have the same attitude that Jesus had and to not look only to their own interests but to value others above themselves.

And over the last few weeks as I've been thinking about today, I've been very much challenged in reading Richard Foster's book 'Celebration of Discipline.' And one of the things he says is this:

'In submission we are at last free to value other people. Their dreams and plans become important to us. We have entered into a new, wonderful glorious freedom – the freedom to give up our own rights for the good of others.'

Well this may seem all very counter-cultural and oppressive to many western ears. We prefer the freedom to cast off restraint and do as we please and make our own decisions and not be dictated to by others. But then, perhaps we are not as free as we sometimes like to think. I think Bob Dylan, if you remember him, summed it up pretty well back in 1979 with his song 'Gonna have to serve somebody.'

'You may be ambassador to England or France  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance  
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world  
You may be a socialite with a string of pearls

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.'

'But you're gonna have to serve somebody' says Dylan. And, of course, the good news in the gospel is that we are invited to serve somebody - a King, who unlike any earthly king says: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

Perhaps then, I can finish with going back to Mary again, and that life changing moment when she is visited by the angel and told how she is going to give birth to a son and call him Jesus. And this teenager's response to all this is quite amazing. She listens and believes and willingly co-operates with God's plan despite the obvious trouble she knows it will cause her. "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said" is what she says.

And how do we respond to those times, when we may sense the Holy Spirit prompting us on some particular matter. It may be a big thing or only a small thing such as to go and offer help to that elderly person living on their own down our street, or to tell someone who's been on your mind for some time about Jesus. And then someone you know, may be going through a difficult time and the Spirit may be prompting you to let them know you're a Christian and that you are praying for them. It could be anything.

You know it's such a privilege when God wants to use us in something he's calling us to for him. And when that happens, may our response be to say, without hesitation - "Yes Lord I'm your servant - I'll willingly do that for you." Amen

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Sermon preached at St Laurence's, Scalby on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> December 2020