

Here Am I ...

... The Servant of the Lord

A sermon given on the the Fourth Sunday before Advent, 20th December 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Attended Communion Service.

Luke 1:26-38

On this last Sunday before Christmas, it's usual for the church to focus on the role of Mary. At our Advent book group the other night, we've been working our way through Archbishop Stephen Cottrell's Christmas book, 'Walking Backwards to Christmas', and we had a bit of a discussion about why God might have chosen Mary for her special role. And that arose because the book presents Mary, as in some ways almost too good to be true. She's imagined as a young girl already fully alive, aware of God's presence in all of creation, full of love, passionate in offering herself up to the full experience of life and wonderfully open and responsive to God. And you read it and you think, 'Yes, I can see why God might have chosen someone like that to be the mother of his son.'

Mary, in this interpretation is an incredibly attractive figure, and it's perhaps deliberately different from the more traditional picture of Mary as someone distinguished, especially by her humility. All those Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation showing Mary as a contemplative, alone and reading her book of prayers when the angel comes to her, and out of her submissive acceptance of her vocation to be the mother of God, she becomes the pattern for all motherhood and for all women. That's the traditional Catholic view; and whilst the picture of Mary offered by Stephen Cottrell's book presents a more lively and interesting kind of Mary, it shares with that traditional image a sense that Mary is already virtually perfect: there's no sign of anything sinful needing to be redeemed; it's a picture of Mary that fits with the traditional view of Mary as someone completely unique, immaculately conceived without sin, her virginity intact even after the birth of Christ. And those views set Mary apart not just from every other woman, but from every other human being.

I don't know how you picture Mary. For me, the important thing is her ordinariness: I imagine her as a rather typical teenager, present company excepted of course, moody and inarticulate; in this whole encounter she hardly says anything in the passage; and what she does say is all about her - and if you want to read it that way, the teenagers self-absorption is all there. I also picture her as a rather plain girl. Maybe that's why she ended

up with Joseph, who seems to be an older man, because none of the boys her own age is interested. Maybe her virginity wasn't entirely out of choice? Who knows?

But at least a Mary like that is easier for us to relate to. A plain and moody Mary might recognise her own need of redemption. And remember, from a theological point of view, the role of Mary is to guarantee that Jesus is fully and genuinely human and that the son of God is genuinely incarnate and one of us. If the mother of God is too good to be true, the whole incarnation starts to look a bit like play-acting, as if Christ is only pretending to be human. So for me, the really important thing about Mary is her sheer ordinariness. And the reason God chose her out of all the millions of other possible women, is exactly the same reason why God has chosen you and me to bear His name: in other words, it's completely baffling; a total mystery and nothing at all to do with us having any special quality.

But maybe having been chosen, the opportunity then opens up to become something more special. Actually, the Annunciation to Mary that she is to be the mother of the Son of God is not quite the unique standalone event we might think. It stands as the latest in a line of encounters with God described in the Old Testament at the beginning of the Ministry of a Prophet. So when Moses is called by God from out of the midst of the burning bush, Moses says, "Here am I." And when the boy Samuel is serving in the temple and hears his name called, he says, "Here am I." When Isaiah the Prophet has an overwhelming vision of God's glory in the temple, he also says, "Here am I, send me." All of these people find themselves summoned by God; they are all given a commission which feels open ended and a bit scary; and all of them respond with their whole being, "Here am I": no conditions; no holding anything back; just a declaration of their willingness to be wholly available to God.

And out of that, something new happens.

So it is with Mary: she's greeted not by name, but with a title, 'Favoured one'; she's afraid and needs to be reassured; she's told that God has a job for her, although what it really meant must have been a complete mystery to her; she's reassured by being told that her cousin Elizabeth is also dealing with a surprise pregnancy and that God does impossible things and so can be trusted. So she responds with a simple statement of trust and availability, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be to me, according to your word."

I like to think that that's the real start of Mary's spiritual journey, the beginning of her transformation into the woman God really wanted her to be. And in that sense, Mary is the

mother of the church, not just by being the unique mother of our Lord, but by being the first disciple and the mother of all disciples characterised by unconditional faith, "Here am I." And that's also a statement of her willingness to be redeemed and transformed. We can look upon her as our inspiration and model: this is how we respond to the word of God; this is how we respond to the presence of God; this is what it looks like to be called to serve God.

And so as we hear the word of God in scripture; as we hear the promises, the invitations and the commands; and as we encounter the presence of God in the Eucharist; as we receive Christ in broken bread and poured out wine; and as we live out our calling to serve God, seeing him in the lives of our brothers and sisters and especially in those who are alone, who are who or who are sick or in need - so we, too, are taking part in the redemption that Jesus makes possible. We're being set free from being turned in on ourselves. And we're being slowly transformed into the people God longs for you and me to be.

So as you approach Christmas this year, may Mary be your guide. May you stand with her as she responds to her calling. And may her faith inspire yours as you offer yourself afresh to God -

*"Here am I, the servant of the Lord.
Let it be with me, according to your word."*

Reading Text

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.