

# Here am I ...

## *... the Servant of the Lord*

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*A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 24th December 2023 by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Luke 1:26-38*

As I mentioned at the beginning, most of us probably have today in mind as Christmas Eve although for this morning at any rate, it's still the fourth Sunday in Advent. So before we find ourselves in Bethlehem later on today, this morning we're still in Nazareth with Mary. And I wonder how you picture the Virgin Mary?

Church tradition has often presented her as a contemplative, with all those Renaissance paintings showing her reading her book of prayers when the angel comes to visit. And it's easy to read her humble acceptance of her calling to be the mother of the Son of God as a model of motherhood for all women. In more recent years, there has been a desire to recast Mary in a more feminist image, seeing her as a feisty, independent woman, unafraid to question the angel about how his message can possibly be true. I find it interesting that when Zechariah, earlier on in Luke's gospel, does exactly the same thing when an angel tells him he's going to be a father - and when he questions it because he and his wife are so old and it seems impossible, he's struck dumb for his unbelief! But when Mary says, "*How can this be since I am a virgin?*" - she's held up as a model of good discipleship!

There's a wonderful modern interpretation of Mary in the Lady Chapel of Ely Cathedral, which shows Mary not as a girl but as a full-bodied woman with flowing tresses of golden hair, arms uplifted and stepping forward, as if she's launching herself off her pedestal into space, into the embrace of God's calling. [*There's lots of pictures of it on the Internet if you want to follow that up.*] But it's interesting how that recasts Mary in a different kind of way. And it's very tempting for us to try and find a reason 'why' God should have chosen Mary for her special role: was it because she was especially devout and open to God; or was it because she was particularly strong minded?

But I think that desire to find a reason for Mary's calling is part of our fallen human nature, which is constantly trying to justify ourselves and to find an explanation as to why God should treat us in a particular way.

Mary's story is in part a story illustrating what theologians call the mystery of election, which is that God freely chooses some people for a certain task for reasons entirely of his own, reasons which we are not privy to. And I think the important thing about Mary is simply her ordinariness. She may have been meek and devout, or she may have been independent and strong minded, or she may just have been a normal, grumpy and hormonal teenager - but none of those things really matters - the important thing is that Mary is a normal human being and not abnormally perfect.

We need to remember that the role of the mother of the Son of God is to guarantee that Jesus is fully human and genuinely one of us. If Mary is too good to be true, then it would seem that Jesus himself, Jesus, her son, isn't really human either, and the whole plan of salvation fails. So

it matters that Mary is an ordinary, normal girl. Having said that, she is chosen for an extraordinary, unique task. And the thing that matters there is that she agreed to it. And if there is one thing in Mary that does make her a model for the rest of us, it's her ability to say 'yes' to her calling from God.

She might have said 'no' to God in all sorts of other ways just like the rest of us, but in this one big matter where it really counted she said 'yes'. And that makes her the first disciple. And actually, whilst Mary's calling to be the mother of the son of God might have been unique, her response does have several precedents. Mary responds eventually to the angel, saying, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord.*"

And that's pretty much the same response made by Moses, by Samuel and by the prophet Isaiah, all in the Old Testament. They all respond to God's calling by saying, "*Here am I.*" Each of them is scared and transfixed by the word of God, unable to run away and hide. It's as if they're each of them, overwhelmed by the enormity of what's happening and all they can do is roll with it and say, "*Here am I. Do with me what you will.*" They don't try to escape; they don't try to defend themselves; they don't try to plead prior commitments; they simply accept God's purpose for them, come what may. So Mary, it seems, stands in the line of Moses and the prophets. Like them, she is called to be the bearer of the Word of God, only in her case, it's the Word made Flesh rather than the spoken word, which she is called to carry and to share with the world.

And in her response, "*Here am I*", Mary is expressing an unconditional faith and I think this is how faith transforms people. This is what makes the real difference: when we lay down our defences when we stop putting limits and conditions on what we are prepared to give God; when our discipleship is offered without terms and conditions - then, God can use us and in the process we are changed.

"*Here am I*" allows us to meet God in all our humanity and in all our ordinariness - we don't have to pretend to be something we're not; we don't have to be perfect; just open and receptive.

So as we hear the word of God in scripture and in sacraments, day by day; as we hear the promises, the invitations and the commands; as the Holy Spirit prompts us to serve God by recognising Christ in the lives of others, and especially those who are alone or who are sick or in some kind of need - so we ourselves help to make Christ present in the world. Mary's response of "*Here am I*" led to her giving birth to the Word of God. And when you and I respond to God in the same way, so we too are allowing a kind of birth to take place.

So may Mary inspire you and guide you, and may her response be yours also: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word*"

# Reading Text

## Luke 1:26-38

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> 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.

## Discussion Points / Points to Ponder:

1. How does the sermon interpret the concept of Christ the King and relate it to the season of All Saints? What insights does this perspective offer?
2. The sermon emphasises the dual nature of Jesus as King on both Earth and in Heaven. In what ways does the earthly kingship of Jesus differ from traditional notions of kingship, and how does this connect to his actions during his time on Earth?
3. The analogy of the Rubik's clock is used to describe the connection between Heaven and Earth. How effective is this analogy in conveying the idea that the two realms are connected but not identical? Are there other analogies or metaphors that could help illustrate this concept?
4. The gospel reading in the sermon focuses on the actions of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick. How does the text challenge our understanding of serving Christ through these acts of kindness, especially when the righteous seem unaware of their service to the King?
5. The sermon suggests that Earthly actions have Heavenly consequences, even if those consequences are not always obvious. Can you think of personal experiences where you may have unknowingly served a deeper purpose through seemingly ordinary actions?
6. The sermon concludes by emphasising the incognito nature of Christ the King, likening it to Shakespeare's Henry V on the night before Agincourt. How does this perspective influence the way we perceive and respond to the presence of Christ in our lives and in the lives of those around us?

## Sermon Summary: "Earthly Actions Have Heavenly Consequences"

- Feast of Christ the King:
  - Reflection on All Saints' season, connecting Heaven and Earth, renewing both realms.
- Jesus as the King:
  - Kingship not obvious on Earth, despite being King of both realms.
  - Titles ('The Christ,' 'Son of God') attributed, yet Jesus didn't resemble a typical king.
- Actions Reflecting Kingship:
  - Jesus announced God's kingdom, issued new commandments, showed authority over various aspects (teaching, healing, nature).
  - Demonstrated a kingdom of Heaven on Earth.
- Differences Between Earthly & Heavenly Kingship:
  - Comparison to Rubik's clock: connected but not identical.
  - Earth and Heaven connected but showcase differences in perception and action.
- Gospel Reading Interpretation:
  - Son of Man revealed in glory, referencing acts of kindness towards the needy as acts towards the King.
  - Earthly actions towards others mirrored in Heaven; serving others is akin to serving Jesus.
- Christ the King's Presence:
  - King's presence often incognito; acknowledging his kingdom's existence within Earthly actions.
  - Recognising service to fellow humans as service to Jesus.
- Main Point:
  - Earthly actions hold Heavenly consequences, often unrecognised.
  - Serving others equates to serving the King; neglecting those in need spurns the King.