

Romans 16:25-end

Luke 1:26-38

Introduction

On this fourth Sunday of Advent we focus on Mary and her role in the birth of Jesus. I have to confess I have always felt very uncomfortable about Mary and until now have never preached on this passage. This is because I was brought up as a Roman Catholic and spent five years in an Irish Convent Boarding School. In this tradition Mary is revered not only on a level with Jesus but almost more so.

Every week day evening of my school life we met in the chapel to say the Rosary. Until it was stolen in a burglary four years ago I still had my silver rosary. The beads remind you of the prayer you say while you meditate on one of the mysteries of faith. So at this time we might meditate on the Joyful mysteries which are:

Annunciation

Visitation

Birth of Jesus

Presentation

Finding Jesus in the Temple

Three Hail Mary's – to faith, hope and charity

Announce the mystery to meditate on

Our Father

Ten Hail Mary's

Glory be

Repeat through all the mysteries

As an eleven year old girl I didn't quite grasp the meditation side of the process. All I knew was that every evening I said the Hail Mary fifty three times!

Hail Mary full of grace

The Lord be with you

Blessed are you 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

I ended up believing I was worshipping Mary. And to make it worse when we went to confession on a Saturday the penance we would be given for any wrongs we had done would be to say a number of Hail Mary's; so receiving the impression that she had some power to forgive my sins.

About a year after I left the convent I came to a personal faith in Jesus through an evangelical youth club and threw off most of my Catholic Upbringing. I wasn't interested in praying to saints – because why bother when you can go straight to God himself through Jesus who gave himself for us.

But the whole thing had left me with a mistrust of Mary and the need to ignore her.

So now, 50 years later, I decided to give her a chance and look at this passage with a dispassionate eye, unbiased by my upbringing to see what it teaches us.

Well of course the first thing we note is that this whole episode is foretold in scripture. Not the visit of the angel but that a virgin would give birth. Isaiah 7:14 says: ¹⁴ *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

As so often with prophecy these words had a current and a future meaning. In the current they were spoken to King Ahaz as a sign of coming judgement on Israel, in the future they tell of the birth of the Messiah who would come to rescue his people.

This is the virgin we hear about in our Gospel Reading. We are told that she lived in a town called Nazareth, that she was betrothed to a Man called Joseph and that her name was Mary. In the Jewish culture of the day a betrothal was a solemn commitment, much more binding than an engagement in our society. This would make it a shocking thing that a young woman promised to marry a man would become pregnant

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before the marriage. It would infer that, either she had been unfaithful or that she and Joseph had jumped the gun. Either option would have been considered shameful.

Favoured

The other thing we know of her is that she had found favour in God's eyes. The angel greets her: "*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.*" It's hardly surprising that we read: "²⁹*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*" Imagine quietly going about your business to be confronted by an angelic being and told that you had found favour with God. Surely there must be some mistake? But no! The angel tells her: "*Do not be afraid Mary you have found favour with God.*"

What an astonishing thing to hear. It is enough for a human parent to tell you, "Well done. I'm proud of you" but to hear those words from God must have been amazing. And in order to earn that sort of accolade Mary must have truly been holy, not in the sickly simpering way she can sometimes be portrayed but as someone who had set her heart on following God, who knew him and who was obedient to him in the way she lived.

Practical

The passage also tells us that she was practical. She asks, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" Her response wasn't the unbelieving confusion Zechariah had showed when the angel told him that Elizabeth was to bear a child in her old age. She simply wanted to know, "How could this happen?" and the angel told her, "*the Holy Spirit would come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you so the holy one to be born will be called the son of God.*"

Wow! Not the usual sort of thing a young woman would be used to hearing. I wondered how I would have felt in her place. That is such an overwhelming prospect. We have got so used to hearing this passage that we pretty much take it for granted. But think for a minute. Mary has been told that she

will bear a child, and that it will be God's child, that she will bear a child of divine origin within her body. How would that make you feel. Think for a moment what that prospect would be like. Think of the honour, the responsibility, the fear. It was bad enough to know that she would be pregnant as an engaged woman and the effect that would have on her standing in the community but to know that the child she would be carry would be God's child must have been overwhelming

And that thought leads us to the last two things this passage tells us about Mary.

She was Trusting and Courageous

Trusting:

Because she believed the angels words to her. She believed that this was God speaking to her and she trusted him to fulfil his promise. She knew and loved God and so she trusted him to fulfil his purposes in her life and through her willingness to work with him.

And

Courageous:

Because it must have taken immense courage to allow all this to happen to her. *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."* What this response shows us is that Mary was willing to obey God even though obeying would impact hugely on her life and the plans she had for the future. The life she had mapped out for herself and Joseph would be very different now. She would have to face the scorn and mockery of her community but she would also have the responsibility for caring for God's child. She could have had no concept of what that would actually mean for her but she would know it would be challenging and difficult.

Having looked at this story with new eyes I ask myself do I have:

God's approval

Readings

Highly Favoured Lady

Shepreth/on line

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A Practical approach to following God – not questioning but saying so how will this happen?

Do I trust him to care for me when he asks me to do things

Do I have the courage to follow wherever that may take me