

Sermon

Friends, we have almost made it. There are only four days left now to Christmas. We're on the threshold, about to step into the splendour and mystery of Christmas - but we are still waiting - just! A colleague of mine calls today "give way Sunday" because even though we are in Advent and still in preparation mode the reality is that once this service is over, our parish Christmas celebrations get into full swing. Christmas trees are flying in to our churches at a rate of knots. Tonight we will be full swing with the Nine Lessons and carols followed by Christmas cake and wine with bubbles. But we are not quite there yet. It is still not Christmas. Today, the Church pauses; we ponder Mary's story before we kneel at last to worship her new born Son on Christmas Day.

Mary's story begins in the New Testament with the Angel Gabriel bringing her the message that she is to be the mother of Jesus. We're so used to hearing this story that our senses are dulled to its power. On the one hand we sentimentalise and sanitise it in our Christmas pageants (the child in us wants to be Mary because the idea of being specially chosen for a special role is so powerful). Or else we get side tracked into fruitless discussion about the historicity of virgin birth.

So we need to get back into Luke's world to get back in touch with the radical story he is trying to tell. This is not a story about the gynaecological status of Mary, but a story which is saying something about *God*. Perhaps even more importantly, we need to focus is what this story is saying about Jesus. The virgin birth is a statement about *Christology*; the nature Jesus. Luke is telling us that the Spirit responsible for the ministry and resurrection of Jesus was also active in his origins, that Jesus must be understood not in terms of his humanity alone, but also in terms of his divinity.

The surprise in the story is that God would choose to come to Mary, a young unmarried woman to be the mother of Jesus. As a young unmarried woman, Mary is therefore a person with little or no status society. Yet she is chosen be the mother of Jesus. She becomes the bearer of the Word of God. As Archbishop Rowan Williams says in his book, *Tokens of Trust*, this does not happen without Mary's consent, her willingness to say "yes" to God. That is one of the really significant aspects of this story of the annunciation. God does not sweep aside our humanity or override the human will in order for the incarnation to take place. God invites the consent of a person who will nurture Jesus in every way; physically, spiritually and emotionally.

But the person God chooses comes as something of a shock. It is still within the memories of many of us that unmarried mothers were treated as a scandal, bringing down the reputation of families. You would think that if God wanted the best for his Son he might have chosen a respectable family who could send Jesus to the best schools and universities and with excellent opportunities guaranteed. God, however, is not embarrassed or perturbed. God chose a young person with no position, status, power or wealth. God chose Mary to be the bearer of God's Son. God's choice is surprising. God came to Mary; a poor person of lowly status to be sure, but also person with an open and trusting heart. That open and trusting heart was the primary qualification for the one who would bear the Son of God into the world.

And that says something about the grace of God. As we tell Mary's story, we see how God looks upon each of us. Mary stands as a witness that frail fleshly beings, you and me, with all our weaknesses and frailties, are not only forgiven and accepted by God as we are, but that we may also serve as vessels for the life of God in all its richness and all its plenty. Mary's body becomes a tent as it were, within which God chooses to dwell. Within her fleshly being, God as the developing child Jesus lived. From the sanctuary of Mary's hospitality, Jesus came forth. So we too, as the church of God in this place, are a tent in which Christ dwells, and our task is to bear Christ into the world just as Mary did, so that others in our community can see and know the grace of God. That's our task and our mission, no more and no less.

And so Mary's response of "yes" is our response to God as well. What a brave "yes" that was, and what a risk it is for us to say yes to God. For Mary, saying "Yes" meant risking everything. What if Joseph accused her of adultery? That would mean death by stoning. How would her family react? What would you say if your teenage daughter came home to say she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit! "Pull the other one," would be my response! Mary risked rejection by her family, and estrangement from her community. Yet Mary took that risk. She shows us first hand, what our calling to be Christian is all about. For her, saying "yes" took guts and determination. She had no idea that it would mean following her Son to the cross. She had no idea that she would be among the first to witness the resurrection and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. All she knew was that she was aware of the unspeakable power of God, of the beauty of God's presence, and so she said "yes." So it is with us. If we say yes to God, we need to be ready for the consequences. We need the same grit and determination. There may be much for us to ponder, swords to pierce our hearts, shepherds and foreign kings snooping around. We may even face

rebuke from Christ. Yet we need to be ready for God's grace to surprise us, we need to be ready to recognise the risen Lord, and to respond with joy and to give thanks for God's plenty.

Mary honoured God with her whole being. She displays our humanity when it is full of grace. She shows us the way to say yes to God with humility. Down through the ages, Mary carrying Jesus in her womb has become a metaphor for the church. She is one of us, fully human. Yet, she bears Christ into the world. God acts through her to bring salvation to the whole world. She is the church from which springs forth the birthing waters of grace, where Christ's brothers and sisters are delivered into God's presence.

We need a positive sense of identity as a people who bear Christ into the world. Church is not something we come to. Church is something we are together. It is part of our being. We are people who collectively, bear Christ within us and become the ones who present Christ to the world when he is born among us. We are a concrete sign of God's presence in this place.

"Let it be according to your word," was Mary's response, even though the future was hidden from her. "Let it be," Mary said, and her future became God's future as well. "Let it be," Mary said, and she sang the first phrase of the Easter song of praise. Here we are in Advent. We are Mary. Our bodies are claimed for the life and purposes of God. Here God greets us: "Greetings favoured one, the Lord is with you!" Here in the Assembly of God's people, we are joined by the Spirit to be more than we ever imagined. Here the sovereignty of God is established in steadfast love forever. Thanks be to God.