

The Lord be with you

All and also with you.

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

All Glory to you, O Lord.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

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.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

All Praise to you, O Christ.

Prayer

It's funny how the lectionary can play tricks on you. The last time I was asked to preach the gospel passage for the day was somewhat sparse, a seeming interlude in Mark's manic account of Jesus' early ministry. Today by contrast our passage has an abundance of riches; there are lots of different opportunities for reflection :

- The timing, the place and the people involved in this extraordinary story

- The appearance of the Angel Gabriel and his opening words to the peasant teenager Mary “greetings favoured one, the Lord is with you’
- The words “fear not’, which often precede a significant encounter with God, or one of God’s Angels throughout the Bible
- The completely outrageous proposition put to Mary of the concept of the Virgin birth, plus the fact that she is able to question and challenge it
- The affirmation, so true, but sometimes so hard to live by that “nothing will be impossible with God’
- The revelation of the fulfilment of God’s plan for God’s creation.... to whom? Not to Kings or High Priests but the humble and lowly Mary
- The realisation that this plan involves God, the source of all being, taking on the constraints of human flesh - fully God and fully human
- The reassurance given to Mary in the form of the miracle of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy
- And of course Mary’s response to the Annunciation in the words “here am I servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word’

Commented [JL1]:

I could stop here and leave the rest of the sermon slot to quiet individual contemplation on this passage which has so much in it to reflect the sovereignty, wisdom, power, faithfulness, compassion and love of God our creator.

But I won't ; However I would encourage all of us to take time out today to dwell on maybe one or two of these absolute gems of truth in today's gospel.

While there is so much of the character of God to wonder upon here, there is also the person of Mary to consider. I'm increasingly fascinated by her; a confession that would leave many of my evangelical friends if not shuddering then at least scratching their heads in perplexity.

What was it about Mary that enabled her to respond to God’s extraordinary proposition with those words so full of grace “let it be with me according to your word”? Mary must have known the immediate consequences of what she was committing to when she said these words. The damage to her reputation and her planned marriage to Joseph, never mind the possible punishments she might have to endure as an unmarried pregnant woman under Judaic law. So to say what she said showed not only a an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty over her life but also a massive trust in in God as her personal saviour and Lord.

We don't really know much about Mary and she doesn't appear that frequently in the gospel narratives. She was a young woman brought up in a highly paternalistic society with the expectation that her role in life would be to bear children and to serve in her family home. She wouldn't have been educated, almost certainly illiterate, but from what we know from other narratives, an observant Jewess who would have had the opportunity to hear (but not debate) the teaching of the law and the prophets in the synagogue and temple as she grew up.

So in many ways, completely different to most of us. We who have had access to education, who are literate, and so able and actively encouraged to read and debate the whole of scripture. And brought up in a wealthy society where we have also been encouraged to self actualise, to be the best that we can be, and to enjoy the freedoms and rights that exist within our established democracy.

Please don't misinterpret me; None of these things are wrong or bad, quite the opposite. However, it may be that given the environment in which we live, our sense of privilege and our expectation of the protection of our human rights enshrined in our laws and culture, it may be that sometimes these privileges blunt our willingness to bow to the sovereignty of God in our lives, rather than to respond to God with the sense of awe, wonder and worship that Mary did.

Again it's difficult to glean much about Mary's personality from her Gospel appearances, but there is a word that is used in this passage and repeated later in the story of Jesus's presentation at the Temple which speaks of her attitude of heart. She 'ponders', she 'treasures all these things in her heart'. I am sure that this attitude of reflection to absorb and dwell in the teachings that she would have heard week in and week out would have enabled her to develop a deep sense of the character of God and therefore to trust God as her exceptional calling is revealed to her by the Angel Gabriel.

And so this thought takes us back to where I started; the theological gems that exist in this passage, this passage which at its heart reveals God's dramatic, outrageous, unexpected, incredible, wonderful plan to restore all creation, all that we see and touch, all those that we know and love and our very selves to the very best that we can be in God's sight.

And that surely is something worth pondering upon.

<Silence>

LET US AFFIRM OUR FAITH in the words of the Creed:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

Let us Pray

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour

Lord, help us find time as Mary did to ponder your word and your truth, and so to grow in our knowledge of your Sovereignty and in our trust in you.

Lord Hear us...

For He has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant, surely from now all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me and Holy is His name.

We pray for all those who are seeking truth, and meaning, and especially those that have been touched by the 'Come and See' initiative. And for any that may feel that they are unworthy of you, maybe too lowly. We ask that you would make known your compassion and love for them and all people, just as you did to your servant Mary.

Lord Hear us...

His mercy is for those who fear Him, from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

We continue to pray for those areas of the world where there is strife and conflict, and where power is being abused. We pray especially today for the situation in Myanmar, for justice to prevail there for all people.

And we continue to ask for wisdom for all those in authority who are having to make difficult decisions in response to Pandemic, and the distribution of vaccines across the world

Lord hear us...

He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty

We lift before you those who fear for their livelihood as a result of the pandemic, and also all those who grieve the loss of a loved one over the past year. We remember the families and friends of the 126,382 souls who are now in your hands from the UK as well as the 2.7 million across the world.

In a moment of silence, we pray for anyone who is especially on our hearts at this moment.

We pray that you would fill our hearts with good things as we grieve.

Lord hear us...

He has helped his servant Israel in the remembrance of His mercy, according to promises he made to our ancestors to Abraham and his descendants for ever.

Finally, we pray for the Land that we call Holy. We pray that as a new government is formed in Israel, there would be a greater drive for peace and an increased sense of justice for all.

Lord hear us...

Merciful Father,

All Accept these prayers

for the sake of your Son

our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.