

Advent 4, 20.12.20

May I speak in the name of God, Mother/Father, Christ and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mary is a tough nut to crack, shrouded as she is in purity, obedience, subservience, meekness and, of course, the unobtainable status she is given as the virgin mother. Mary is, in some ways, an impossible figure, for women especially.

I distinctly remember, as a curate in the Chichester Diocese, attending the meeting of a group set up for women named 'the Dead Sea', and listening to one woman's exasperation at the utterly unobtainable and frustrating portrayal of Mary as meek and mild virgin mother. For the woman in question, it was enough to lead her to write Mary off as someone who had no place being used as an example for women today, especially in a context where women were desperately trying to find a voice in a diocese so set against that.

Even in our staff meeting this week, we spent some time discussing how much choice Mary had in her encounter with Gabriel: did she say 'yes' of free will, or was she given no choice? Was Gabriel's message an invitation or an order from a patriarchal God?

And yet, within those patriarchal constructs of the time of writing, it is perhaps no wonder that Mary is portrayed in this way: in a society in which men were the dominant force, the virgin mother, the meek and mild young girl, would perhaps be the epitome of perfect womanhood.

So what to do? How do we reclaim Mary? How do we liberate her from the alabaster piety she has been encased within for so long? It

was exactly these questions that I remember posing to the women of 'The Dead Sea' 18 years ago.

As I reflected upon today's readings, it struck me that we might find some answers in the first reading from the 2nd book of Samuel. We are told that King David was 'settled in his house', God having given him rest from his enemies. Aware of his own settled circumstances, David reflects upon the temporary nature of God's dwelling in a tabernacle, or ark, in a tent. Nathan replies, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."

Later that night, however, the word of God comes to Nathan and contradicts that very sentiment. God refutes David's supposition that he should build God a temple, telling him that it is his offspring who will do this, not David, and promising that God will make *David* a house instead.

Sixteen or seventeen generations later, however, in the midst of second Temple times, God builds a quite different temple in which to dwell: the womb of Mary.

In John's gospel, after he has thrown out the money changers and traders from the Temple, Jesus challenges those in his midst by saying:

"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

The reply comes that it has taken 46 years to build this temple and is Jesus going to rebuild it in three days, but, says John:

"The temple he had spoken of was his body."

So begins the paradigm shift from the physical building of the temple as the dwelling place of God in the ark of the covenant, to Jesus as

that same dwelling place. Jesus, the man, can be the temple in which the ark of the covenant, the Spirit of God, dwells.

Yet, as a tiny one, unborn, unable to survive alone, the Spirit of God in Jesus relies upon Mary to be the temple in which he dwells.

Through her betrothal to Joseph, Mary continues the connection with the promised house of David, and what a house! For, Gabriel says of 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.”

This house of David will, generations after David’s reign, bring forth the Word made flesh whose kingdom will have no end.

While Nathan announced that the Lord was with David, only to find that God had other plans for the building of the temple, Mary, on the other hand, becomes essential, integral to God’s plan for the building of a new temple to house the Spirit of God, marking that paradigm shift from building to person in Jesus. As Gabriel says to her:

“Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you... Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.”

There is no retraction with Mary. Instead, God chooses to dwell within her womb, to be one with her flesh, her bones, her life blood. God chooses the melody of her voice and the sounds of her body, her very heartbeat for comfort. God chooses to be nurtured and birthed by this woman.

In the pre and peri-natal world, much is understood about the time in utero and the effects it has on us, for better and worse, gently

leading families to repair where the journey has not been an easy one. In the light of this understanding, this time of nurture, safety and stability in his mother's womb becomes crucial for Jesus' wholeness and wellbeing as the full human being he is, crucial for the life he will live, for the passion he will endure and for the death he will die.

The temple in Jerusalem was built to be a place of safety, stability and beauty, a sacred, holy place, home of the ark of the covenant, the Spirit of God. Now, for these nine months, Mary's own body becomes that temple of safety, stability and beauty, sacred and holy, the dwelling place of the living God in Jesus.

Mary's act of profound bravery in saying 'yes' to God's plan results in the greatest and most exquisite honour for her and for all women, not because she bore a child, but by virtue of her being the temple of the ark of the covenant, the dwelling place of the Spirit of God. From the womb of God we all come; from the womb of Mary, God in Jesus came.

But the story doesn't end here, for now we, too, are invited to become temples of the Holy Spirit of God, dwelling places for the Almighty.