

22 December 2024: Mary the model (for us)

Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

Today is the final Sunday of Advent before Christmas, before we celebrate that momentous day in history when God came to be with us in Jesus! And it is a truly world-changing event that rightfully marks our calendars as BC and AD.

I'm not a fan of the movement to rename things CE or BCE (Common Era or Before the Common Era) because it deliberately misses out the defining moment of history: God coming to earth!

It's so important! God **came down**. He **descended**. He **reduced** himself....to a vulnerable baby. As a pointer to our lives, this is crucial: how are we to live our lives? Go down! How are we to be liberated? Become weak. How are we to find freedom? Become a slave to Christ. **Not in our power, but in his power.** It reverses all human systems, and tells us to look out for the least rather than strive to be the dominant.

But also that God didn't choose to be born of a chicken in an egg. He didn't choose to be a cute puppy. **He chose humans.** The God of infinity, who transcends time and space, chose fleshly ash heaps like you and me. **He raised up humans from the dirt and gave us the dignity of being one of us.**

If God became a human, then that says something about the sanctity of life – and how precious your life is.

And God came to this world through a **woman**, and today, on this fourth Sunday of advent, we remember Mary, the most blessed woman who ever lived. She was **chosen to carry the presence of God** in a physical way! Her frail little body was indwelt by God.

In the ancient world, marriage happened early. Mary was likely 12-14 years old, and pledged to be married to an older man. In her society, her virginity would have been assumed and prized, and the idea that she was pregnant before marriage would have brought shame on her, her family, and Joseph.

So when Gabriel tells her she is highly favoured, note the actual reality: **she is actually experiencing isolation and social rejection.** Shame from family and friends. Rejection from polite society. Scorn from older women. In our world, people would say "slut shaming". Even the future husband tried to get rid of her!

Well, God had a word with Joseph, and told him to bury his own pride and marry her. Now, **he too has to endure humiliation:** is it his child? Is he a cuckold, deceived by Mary?

The direction God takes everyone involved is **downwards**. Being blessed is actually not a good thing! It's messy and embarrassing and shameful! If that's blessing, I want a curse!

But God calls me to follow him on that path in a direction I don't want to go...a direction in which I, like Mary, have to **stop pretending that I am in control**. I, like Mary, have to trust God and **hand over the keys of my life**. It's not about me and my reputation. My temporary shame is for God's glory.

And Mary "gets" it. **She goes with God**. She has heard the scriptures of Israel, learned the message of salvation, and caught the vision of God. She gives us the **Magnificat, the song of Mary**. In it, she echoes the song of Hannah from the book of Samuel, and declares her amazement at what the Lord God has done for her, how he has looked upon her with favour – despite her sufferings.

She shows faith that, **in future, all generations will call her blessed**. Now they call her promiscuous, but in future they will know that she became the one who carried God in her womb.

And she takes forwards this pious humility and trust that God's mercy is for those who fear him. He has scattered the proud. He brings down the powerful. He lifts up the lowly. He gives food to the hungry, but dispels the oppressive rich. He remembers his promise made to Abraham and his descendants – his promise that he will be faithful, even though they were not.

So Mary embodies trust and handing over her body and life to the will of God. She trusted God with literally all she had... and was. A real lesson for us: give yourself into the hands of God – it will be a journey that will give your life so much more meaning!

Now, I don't know about you, but if you think about why you are here, and who was most important in your life, I wonder who you might think of? For **John and Charles Wesley**, the men who changed England in the 1700s, I think they would say it was their mother **Susanna** who laid the model foundation that enabled them to take the good news of Jesus forwards.

John Newton, the slave trader, had a mother who taught him scripture and faith as a child, and when he cried out to God in a storm, it was the foundation she laid that turned his life around.

For me, my mother laid the foundation of love for God that led me to ministry. **Monica**, mother of St Augustine, was critical in turning his life around from debauchery to serving Christ.

Paul mentions the mother and grandmother of **Timothy** in his letter; I'm pretty sure that **Elizabeth** was vital for John the Baptist, and **Mary** was hugely important in the life of Jesus.

Mothers and women here today: you are so important! You all have so much influence! I think of my life and I can mostly point to **Godly women** who have guided and shaped me. So

do not lose heart! You have such a crucial role in laying foundations that will stand the test of time.

And as I was reading, I came across something very interesting: in our gospel reading, Mary meets Elizabeth, and the baby within Elizabeth – the future prophet, John the Baptist – leaps for joy that he is meeting the mother of His Lord. And Elizabeth says “blessed is she who believed...what was spoken...by the Lord!”

This might actually be a **joke at the expense of Elizabeth’s husband!** Zechariah is of course the priest who did not believe that Elizabeth would be pregnant, and who was then struck dumb in punishment! Elizabeth could be drawing a contrast between him – the priestly man who should have known better – and this young girl, Mary, who has faithfully believed the word of the angel to her. Poor Zechariah might be feeling rather embarrassed by her comment!

The proud priest has to go down and face being humbled by the faith of a teenager, who had probably never had a formal education.

God is on the side of those who are weaker and lesser. His grace levels the playing field. Before God, no one can stand, and in fact it is very often the women who serve so lovingly in the background who are the ones God is really noticing.

So today, as we remember Mary’s role and mission, let us look at ourselves:

- **First: Men! Honour the ladies in your life!** Protect and serve them, for their influence is tremendous!
- **Second: men and women:** keep on praying and teaching and inputting into the lives of your family. **You do not know the influence you are having.** Your input can come back to the minds of children and grandchildren at crucial times and moments
- Third: let us all **note the direction of God’s travel: downwards.** He chose humility. He chose to be a vulnerable helpless baby. Yet in doing so, he gives honour and dignity to human life.

So let us this Christmas commit ourselves to serving those who are weak and joining with those who are poor, to – like Mary – acknowledge that in our frailty God can do amazing things.

God asks for the lanky teenager who has not been to school. He asks for the girl who has spent much of her life knitting, cooking and washing up. The one who was in the backroom while the men discussed politics.

God sees that precious, **humble, pious** obedience and faith, and says “I can work with that”. Let’s tip our hats to Mary, and take her as a model for our own lives. Like her, let us **take a risk and that step of faith, look for the quiet humble people and support them, and trust God with our lives this Christmas!**

