

Sermon Advent 4 Year B 2020

On this fourth Sunday we hear again the familiar and, indeed, well-loved story of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she would be the mother of God's son. The picture the evangelist Luke paints for us is so evocative and so enduring it has become one of the key images of this sacred time: of the humble, young girl of Nazareth accepting the word of the angelic messenger. And this image translated into countless hymns and carols, poems and paintings. Even those who do not care much for Mary, and have little time for her, cannot - at least at this time - escape her!

So, the Virgin of Nazareth is placed before us front and centre. And this is no bad thing! In some church circles, even the very mention of the Blessed Mother can evoke a nervous twitch. Mary stands as perhaps the most maligned and misunderstood of all figures in sacred scripture. Even amongst traditions such as ours, there can remain an uncritical prejudice against her. So, it is important we see Mary front and centre in the Christmas story. It is important to be reminded of the simple fact that there is no Christ without her. God does not further his plan of salvation without her consent. We cannot read the Christmas story without her. We cannot come to our celebrations this week without her company, without her directing us to her Son.

As we hear again the story of the Annunciation, it is important as catholic Christians to remember there is no authentic catholic faith without veneration of the Mother of God. This means that as Catholic Anglicans we will not tolerate her being side-lined or belittled. We will not accept the dismissive arguments that the honour due the Blessed Mother is simply popish extravagance, and that we did away with all that 500 years ago. Wherever the catholic faith is lived in its fullness – which this church seeks to do - then we must make room for Mary in our faith and our life. And this does not come from subjective speculation. The honour and veneration the church seeks to bestow on Mary comes quite simply by a frank and honest reading of the scriptures!

Now, as we turn and trust the record of scripture, Mary appears as an apparently ordinary person. We might argue she is so unlikely and her background so obscure that she was an unlikely representative of humankind to give birth to the saviour. Mary was so simple, so plain, so ordinary, so much like the rest of us. And that's the answer, to the question, 'why Mary?' The flesh that became Jesus came from the body of one who was just like us.

The body that gave birth to him was just as plain and ordinary and vulnerable as ours. Mary's ordinariness, then, allowed God to make it absolutely clear that Jesus was truly and fully human. No one could say that Jesus was not like every one of us in every way, or that he only *appeared* to be truly human. But this is exactly what the old heresy of Docetism did argue: that Jesus only 'appeared' human. They depended on the argument that a truly transcendent, mysterious and utterly 'other god' could not be so compromised and degraded by allowing himself to take on our common, ordinary human flesh. But that's the whole point of the Christian story of salvation! The mystery and wonder of Christian faith is precisely this point: there is no salvation if the Eternal Word doesn't take on our ordinary, common human flesh!

In the gospel portion we hear today, we hear Mary will be *mother*, that she will *give birth*, and that this child will be her son, even as he will be *the Son of God*. So basic and essential is this that we overlook its importance. God deals in reality. He is, after all the Ultimate Reality. The Docetics who said Jesus only 'appeared human' were really depending on the idea of a God who plays tricks on us, who deceived us with someone who 'looked' human but wasn't really. Which is why we come back to the gospel text today. God is not seeking to pretend with us. The promised child will not only 'appear' to be human with Mary only 'appearing' to be a mother. Jesus is *truly human* and Mary *truly his mother*. From Matthew's Gospel we learn that the promised child is to be called 'Jesus' because *he will save us*. And that is not possible if he does not truly and actually take on our full, human flesh.

For this very reason – that unless Christ, the second person of the Trinity, took *true flesh* in the womb of a *true mother* – that the Council Ephesus in 431 bestowed Mary with the title *Theotokos* – the 'God-bearer', or as we are more familiar with, *Mother of God*. The Council – to which Anglicans subscribe – understood the title to *not* be a Mariological one but a Christological one. The council fathers recognised that to say the right thing about Jesus it is necessary to say the right thing about his mother. And so, this simple – but important - title defends the essential Christian teaching about the nature of Christ: Jesus as fully divine and fully human. The 'Mother' of Mother of God defends his true humanity. And the 'God' part of the title defends his true divinity. Accepting the simple story we hear in the gospel today *on its own terms* necessarily leads to make the conclusion of the fathers at Ephesus; that in honouring the mother we honour the Son; that she necessarily deserves the title Mother of God.

But at a more immediate level we should find in Mary an example of faith which speaks to all Christians. We hear how while Mary was *open* to what the angel had to say to her, she was also honest enough to question how this could come about. Yet even in her questioning, she was obedient. She replies to the angel: *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.* Hers was an open faith which could hear and heed God's message. Hers was a faith which had not grown tired and sceptical and cynical about such things. Hers was an uncomplicated faith and pure enough for her to believe in miracles. Hers was a faith able to accept a truth that came from outside human knowledge and beyond human capacity.

And hers was a faith of courage. She was willing to stand up to the gossip or rejection (and danger!) that would surely come her way because she was pregnant and unmarried. As the gospels unfold, we hear how she would bear a son who would be taken from her all too soon. She was willing to give him away so the whole world could have him. She would watch her son walk the rocky road of a controversial religious leader, see him receive threats and abuse. And she would stand at the foot of a cross, helplessly watching him die a humiliating death.

Mary stands before us then, even today, as an icon, an image of faith. Yet, as followers of the Lord Christ, we are presented with the same message as the one declared to Mary by the angel: to carry and to bring to birth the living Word of God within us! This is what it means to be a Christian. But to help us in the holy task, Mary helps us believe in the miraculous possibilities of God. She helps us believe in the truth that only the power of God can produce salvation from something as insignificant and ordinary as us. Mary helps us understand that as God chose her, *he chooses us* in our commonness and our ordinariness to be the continuing instruments of his flesh. And she becomes our mother as we live this life together as the body of Christ.

The Mother of God – *Theotokos* - the God bearer, shows us that we are to be the bearers of the Christ. Our bodies are where he lives on this earth. By opening our lives to Christ, we, like Mary, are blessed among all men and women. As Christmas Day rapidly approaches, we should not be lost in either a haze of sentimentality or hardened to the wonder of what we celebrate. Mary's faith asks to be nothing more than Christ bearer. What more solemn, holy, mysterious, wondrous task could there be?! Called to carry Christ into the world. Called to bring him to birth in our lives. And we can fulfil that call by allowing his mother to show us the way. Amen.