

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 21 December 2025, the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Collect (the Church's prayer for today):

Eternal God,
as Mary waited for the birth of your Son,
so we wait for his coming in glory;
bring us through the birth pangs of this present age
to see, with her, our great salvation
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

Today's reflection is by Reader, Cal Bailey.

Let's pray: Lord God, we thank you for Mary and Joseph and the very different roles they played in your birth here on this earth. Help us to learn from them today. Help us to be not only hearers of your word, but doers also. Amen.

I wonder how you feel about your body? Perhaps you live with pain. Or have a disability. Maybe you feel the need to spend ages applying make-up. Or you might live with body shame, to do with weight, or scars or other hurts. Perhaps you have other secrets about your body you do not wish to name.

I guess we all spend enormous time thinking about our bodies. Our thoughts can probably be categorized under one of three subjects: fear – where your body makes you desire things - like food or alcohol or sex - to a degree you'd rather it didn't; or hurt – where control or pain has been used to inflict change by the wrong use of power in a relationship; or possibly neglect – where you wonder whether your body has any value on earth, especially if you believe it's not needed in heaven.

On the whole we aren't very positive about our bodies. Let's see what can we learn from our gospel today about the purpose of the human body.

One of the greatest insights I've learned in studying the New Testament is to understand that references to Mary, mother of Jesus, are often ways of talking about Israel. Mary is the embodiment of Israel at its best – faithful, obedient, willing and devoted. She is the one who perfectly keeps the covenant with God that Israel breaks so painfully. The conception of Jesus through Mary and the Holy Spirit says two things. Firstly that Jesus is utterly human *and* Jesus is utterly God. And secondly, that Jesus is utterly Israel; that God hasn't given up on the covenant between himself and Israel. He's a Jew because his mother is Jewish. He's also God because he's conceived by the Holy Spirit. He's the embodiment of everything the Old Testament longed for – the total harmony of Israel and God.

Mary fully participates in the birth of Jesus. And I want us to see the significance of this for our thinking about the purpose of the human body. The boldness of Christianity is that it helps us to discover what our lives are for. Mary discovers what her life is for, and her discovery is a discovery for all of us too.

Do you remember what Abraham was told Israel was for? In Genesis 12, God says to Abraham that through Israel, all the peoples of the earth would find a blessing. Here in Matthew 1, Joseph is told that Mary is to be a channel for the way the Holy Spirit will bless the world. In Luke's gospel we see the same story from Mary's point of view. She realizes that she is the Lord's servant (Lk 1:38). And she sings the wonderful song: "My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" (1:46). That blessing is Jesus, God with us. What Mary discovers is that she exists to be a channel for the Holy Spirit. What we discover is that we exist to be a channel of the Holy Spirit. That's what our bodies are for.

Can you see how liberating this claim is? We have a constant voice inside us telling us that our bodies aren't good enough. We don't have the right shape or height or strength or fitness or beauty. And we hear constant voices *outside* us telling us what our bodies have to experience to be fulfilled – the best coffee, that super exotic perfume, the wildest sex, dancing like it happens on Strictly, the experience of childbirth.

But hard as it may be, we don't have to listen to those voices. Because we've discovered through Mary what our bodies are really for.

Our bodies are for conceiving, nurturing and giving birth to the way the Holy Spirit blesses the world.

We won't be held finally accountable for whether we ate a particular dietary additive, or experienced the rush of being a brilliant skateboarder. We'll be held to account for this: Did we allow our body to be a channel of the grace of God's Holy Spirit?

Before you say, or do something, ask yourself: 'Is this expressing my desire to let the Holy Spirit work through me?' Life's not about being clever or fit or wealthy or talented: it's simply about letting God work through you.

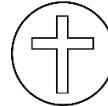
That means letting God's grace be seen in your smile, to make strangers feel accepted, appreciated and welcome. It means letting God's Holy Spirit be channelled through your touch, when you draw close to a person the world has shunned. It means letting God's gentleness be felt in your words, when you speak a difficult truth to a person who isn't ready to hear it. It means putting your body between another and danger, as several members of the public did at Bondi Beach 10 days ago. It means letting your wounds and imperfections become a channel, not of bitterness, but of grace and glory. I doubt I know anyone who doesn't have a hang-up about their body. Probably, Mary did too. But she discovered that her body wasn't a place of fear, or hurt or neglect. She believed her body was made to give birth to the work of the Holy Spirit. So is mine. So is yours.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, make us into channels for the work of your Spirit, we pray. Help us to see our bodies, not with shame, but with joy at the possibilities they give us to be channels of your love. When we want to focus on our own bodies excessively, help us to remember Mary who so deeply and so joyfully and so wonderfully served you.

Amen.

 JAMES WOODSIDE
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