

**St Mary the Virgin, Westerham****Advent 4 - 20 December 2020****Thoughts on a Sunday****(Luke 1: 26-38)**

We're nearly there, aren't we! Christmas will be upon us in just 5 days' time, however we've decided to celebrate this year. Are we prepared? Part of that preparation, of course, is buying presents for people we love, and also letting people know what we might like to be given. Most children by now will have sent off their requests to Santa Claus. Do they expect to get it, or do they just hope? And what about surprises? I remember years ago reading one of my grandson's letters to Father Xmas – he didn't think he was on the 'naughty list', he hoped he might get what he'd asked for, but wanted Santa to let him know if it wasn't going to arrive! No surprises there!

That sums up most of us I imagine – on the whole we don't like surprises, we like to be able to choose and feel we have some control over events, and our experience tells us largely what the outcome is likely to be. But what must it have been like for Mary, when she was suddenly confronted by the angel Gabriel. That must have been a huge shock in itself, to suddenly find yourself face to face with a supernatural being – however wonderful it might be to meet an angel.

And then she was given the startling news that she was to become pregnant, but the baby's father wouldn't be her fiancée Joseph, but somehow would be God. Mary was even told the baby's name would be Jesus, and he was to be the fulfilment of God's promise to King David, to send someone who would 'reign over the house of Jacob for ever.'

It's hard to know exactly what might have been going through that young girl's mind, but she did ask the obvious question: 'How can that be, since I am a virgin?' she asked. In other words, 'it's not biologically possible!' But then Luke records how Mary was told that God's Holy Spirit would come upon her, and God's power would overshadow her, to make it possible for the holy baby, the Son of God, to be conceived. It was to be a miracle. And to reinforce this extraordinary claim, the angel told Mary how her elderly relative Elizabeth, who for years hadn't been able to have a baby, was now, in fact, through God's grace, 6 months pregnant, and we know that she went on to have John, who paved the way for Jesus.

What must it have done to the hopes and expectations of Mary, looking forward to getting married to Joseph and possibly getting their own house and starting a family in due time. In those days it was considered a complete disgrace to have a child out of wedlock, but she went ahead and agreed to the angel's suggestion: 'Here am I', she said, 'the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.'

There's lots we don't know about this story – Mary, after all, was a very young girl and thoroughly human. Did she really believe it, or did she think it was perhaps all a dream? 'If I say yes, it'll all go away!' If she did believe it, did she think it through or ask for time to consider her answer? It doesn't seem so. And was she, in fact, the first girl God had asked to be the bearer of himself, or was she the first to say 'yes' – we'll never know for sure, but then there's much about God we cannot know. The mysteries of God constantly surprise us, which is where our faith comes in. What we are certain of is that Mary did, in fact, find herself to be pregnant and, as the Christmas story bears out, gave birth to a baby boy in the town of Bethlehem, seat of David's line, as foretold by the prophets of old.

There's a temptation to hear this story in maybe a detached way – what's it got to do with us, and is it too far-fetched to believe? But Mary was ordinary, just like us, so if she could say 'yes' to God, to having her life turned upside down, is it really so difficult for us to do the same. It's sometimes hard to judge whether a young person in particular is acting out of courage or naivety, until the scenario really gets underway. I'm sure we'll all agree though that young people such as Greta Thunberg, challenging world leaders on climate change, and the young footballer Marcus Rashford, campaigning for free food for children, are showing extraordinary courage and insight, rather than being naïve in their attempts to change things for good. We can feel gratitude to Greta and Marcos for flying the flag, And we can be eternally grateful to Mary for her courage.

But as well as being ordinary, Mary was also special, just like us. We are all special to God. God loves each one of here today just as much as he loved Mary and the people of Lebanon. God's love, mercy and compassion is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, in the good times as well as the bad. His love for us is inexhaustible, it is active and alive through the Holy Spirit. And if we allow God's Holy Spirit to dwell in us and have control of our lives, we'll experience the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy and peace in our own lives and in our relationships with others.

As we come to the end of Advent - a time of spiritual preparation to receive again and again with love and joy, Jesus Christ our Saviour, God incarnate - let's consider in the next few days before the Christmas celebrations begin, what our own hopes and fears and expectations of receiving Jesus into our lives might look like, and are we willing and ready to be surprised? One thing we can be assured of is that, in coming to earth to live among us as a human being, as well as someone who is divine, God doesn't worry about whether or not we're on the naughty list – his presence is a gift of grace, freely given to all who are willing to receive him. And for that we give grateful thanks to Mary for making it possible.

Amen

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