

## Two Stories about Mary

Luke 1:46-56

Protestants have traditionally neglected Mary, because we were determined not to be Catholics, and as such, have lost sight of this magnificent, remarkable example of faith.

I want to hang our thinking this morning on four words,  
And the first of these is....

### **Surprise**

“To a place in Galilee which is named Nazareth, to a virgin, engaged to a man” – Luke 1:27

By some Mary has been called the first Christian  
She is the bearer of God,  
She is from amongst the poorest  
She is 12

What a surprise, that our model of faith  
Is a 12 year old girl, who is middle Eastern

We have distinguished white men, distinguished men with beards and moustaches.  
But this is someone who is young, Middle Eastern, poor.  
More like Malala Yousafa, than Joe Biden, Charles Spurgeon, John Stott, or John Calvin.

And there are two big big stories about Mary,  
Which illustrate the tension within her,  
So add that to the list  
Teenager, Middle Eastern, Poor, Sophisticated. Chosen, blessed, favoured.

She is the one who is the virgin in the outside place called Nazareth, who is betrothed  
Of all the worst places  
Of all the worst times  
She is the one.

Let our preconceptions and prejudices be shattered that someone outside our expectation  
Can be visited by angels saying “Graced are you, who have found grace”

Our second word is....

### **Gift**

“For nothing is impossible for God” – “Behold I am a servant of the Lord, let it become  
according to your world” – Luke 1:38

I was recently listening to the writer Liz Gilbert talk about the pandemic, and she said that she wished she had gone into more limp, more accepting, more ready to receive.

This the great thing about Mary, she is ready to receive this great, but highly disruptive gift.  
Perhaps the best gifts are always highly disruptive,  
The ones that we would never have chosen for herself.

To accept gifts in this way is to believe in a huge God,  
A God who can hold the air, hold the cells of the human body,  
The God who holds and can redeem all things  
Do you believe in that God,  
Or do you believe in a God who is distant, and can only get at the world through predefined levers.  
What if you could believe in a God who is everywhere with intention,  
And then would you be able accept that.

The old prayer  
God give me courage to change the things I can  
Serenity to accept the things I cannot,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.

This is the Mary who accepts the gift  
And this is so unusual to be quite like this  
Abraham is not like this, or Moses, or Elijah – where they all have moments of rejection  
Mary accepts, she receives  
She receives God.

So what is the thing that you are asked to receive as disruptive gift  
Not to push against it,  
Not to reject it,  
But to receive,  
And let it take you into a new life.

The Third word is....

**Protest**

There is something in Mary though,  
That she is accepting, but she is not passive to the state of the world  
She receives the movement of God,  
But because of that, everything else is not received as necessary  
The given order of things.

The pious devout version of Mary could certainly sing  
“My soul magnifies the Lord  
My Spirit rejoices in God my saviour”

But when Mary starts to  
“He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts  
Brought down powerful from thrones”  
We worry that she has introduced an unnecessarily disruptive note into her otherwise endearing piety

When she sings

“He has filled the hungry with good things” we laud her commitment to charity

But when she sings,

“And the rich he has sent away empty” we fear she has turned into a Communist.

This is the paradox you must see in Mary

With the acceptance comes also a certain total rebelliousness, a refusal to accept

She is a singer in the tradition of Joan Baez, or Billie Holiday singing about Strange Fruit.

I have in the past struggled with the downside of the Magnificat – the rich being brought down.

Until you think about context,

In her era she was singing in the time of King Herod.

Herod who was possibly responsible for perhaps a million deaths.

About that guy

Singing

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones”

Seems the least you might sing.

Or perhaps closer to our own context, I was greatly disturbed to read the testimony of Raphael Marshall, a civil servant, to the house of commons on the recent evacuation of Kabul.

About 75,000 Afghans who had been promised help by the UK, but were tragically let down. This included the story on the evening of 25<sup>th</sup> August, a group of 7 women’s rights activists waited at the British controlled gate at Kabul Airport, next to the Baron hotel. They had been promised safe passage by the Home Secretary, but the decision to let them through depended on the foreign secretary. Urgent emails were sent to the foreign secretary, which was not guaranteed to gain anything because he was very slow in responding to emails, but on this occasion he simply refused to read the submission because the information was presented in a table which had the wrong format. And so they were condemned to wait the night in a group of 25,000 people, and possibly await murder and violence at the hands of the Taliban.

When you read a story like that, you have no hesitation in singing with Mary

“He has scattered the proud.”

And the temptation is that we think of Mary’s acceptance as being true faith

And there is no problem with speaking that in a Church

And her rebel song as being anti-faith, and that is much more uncomfortable to speak about in Church

Mary teaches us that both are part of faith,

Both part of the faith of the woman God chose to be the mother of his Son.

The Final word is

**Story**

“My soul magnifies the Lord” – Luke 1:46

This is a bold claim. It actually says makes big.

There is something about Mary’s soul that makes God bigger

This is literally true as God grows bigger inside of her

But also something about her story which magnifies her story.

And also

“From now on, all generations will call me blessed”. Luke 1:48

For all the joy of this moment, you would struggle to call Mary’s story a happy story.

A sword will pierce her soul

She will watch her son die

She will struggle at times with his identity

But there is great joy here in knowing that my soul makes God bigger

That from now on all generations will call me blessed.

Kate Bowler in her book “Everything happens for a reason, and other lies I’ve loved”

Talks about her experience studying the prosperity gospel,

The version of faith that says if you pray right, and give right, and believe right,

Then God will get you the house, get you the promotion, get you the car, get you the perfect family.

And she studied this movement as an academic, growing close to the communities who practised this, but also always with an academic aloofness, that these were people to be studied, observed, critiqued, they were obviously wrong.

And then she herself was diagnosed with grade IV colonic cancer,

And she realised that she herself had believed a more subtle version of the prosperity gospel,

That if she worked hard, and behaved herself, that fundamentally God would look after her.

And in the pain of a kind of faith, which accepted gifts as non-disruptive

She had to now make sense of her pain and her loss.

She said that people who advised her were broadly of three categories.

There were the fixers – have you tried cranberry juice, there’s a healer near me I can hook you up with

And she got tired of the fixers – “given the choice of your friend, or my highly qualified doctor and oncologist, I’m going to trust the oncologist”

Then there were the minimisers – death is nothing at all, this is all part of the rich pattern of life, from dust we came, to dust we return, we will go to heaven, and death is nothing at all.

And then there were the teachers – God will be doing some really special through you in this, when God closes a door he opens a window, God will use this to bring glory to him

And she got tired of the teachers, who thought that this lesson that was being learned or taught, would be worth more than her getting to bring up her son.

So what did she do,

She did something similar to Mary

She had to trust that somehow this story of hers at some level – though difficult, and profoundly upsetting – would one day be woven into God's story.

In the same way that Mary says from now on all generations will call me blessed.

In the story the whole point is that you get thrown about, that you get stretched, that you don't know the outcome, and that is what gives the story the power, that is what leads to the fullness of the resolution.

And that my story will be brought into that kind of story, in which God will be made bigger, and my story will be remembered as part of the story of faith.

That is the hope, that this story will make sense.

So Mary, what does her story speak to us about

- Of God's surprise
- Of acceptance
- Of protest
- Of our story being bound into God's story

Nothing is impossible for God

This is Mary's story

Let it also be yours

AMEN