

“Advent 4 – the Virgin rejoiced”

20th December 2009

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Readings:

Micah 5: 2 - 5a

Luke 1: 26 - 55

The Virgin rejoiced!

Think about that for a moment. Here was Mary ... unmarried but pregnant. What were people going to think about that?

Not only was she pregnant, she was also engaged ... and the man she was pledged to be married to was not the father of her child ... and, for obvious reasons, she knew it.

There are many ways in which first century Palestine was different to twenty-first century England ... but one of these was in the who matter of sexual morality. God's plan was (and still is!) very clear on the subject. Sex is for marriage, not before.

For a young girl like Mary to be pregnant before marriage was a matter of disgrace. She could have been thrown out by her family ... shunned by her local community ... even stoned to death as an immoral woman.

As for Joseph – her husband to be – he would be almost certain to end the engagement, since he was the one who knew for certain that the baby was *not* his. In fact, for Joseph to marry Mary would be seen either as an admission that he *was* the father of Mary's baby ... or else a sign that he was daft enough to take on a girl who had been unfaithful to him.

But none of that takes into accounts what happens when God gets involved!

Let's turn the clock back for a moment ... back about seven hundred years, to the time of the prophet Micah.

Micah had some words to say about Bethlehem ... a rather insignificant, unimportant little town, but which long ago had been the birthplace of King David ... about three hundred years before Micah's time, and about a thousand years before the birth of Jesus.

Bethlehem had an important place in history, then, but not that much of any significance had happened there since David's time ... and not much was going to happen until the time of Jesus. A thousand years of not very much going on!

But God had a plan, and Bethlehem had an important part to play in that plan!

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are of old, from ancient times."

Bethlehem may have seemed to be an unimportant, insignificant little town ... but God had big plans for it. From Bethlehem would come God's anointed leader... the good shepherd ... the king of kings ... the one whose greatness would be known to the farthest ends of the earth ... the bringer of peace. Bethlehem was to be the birthplace of the Messiah!

And yet, seven hundred years after Micah, the action begins not in Bethlehem, but about seventy miles north, in a place called Nazareth. Nazareth, if anything, was even less of a place than Bethlehem. At least Bethlehem had a history, while Nazareth was a sort of no-hope town in the north of Israel, in the region of Galilee ... Galilee of the Gentiles ... a place of mixed races and muddled religion, looked down upon by the respectable people in Jerusalem and the south.

In fact, Nazareth had such a poor reputation that many years later, when Philip told Nathanael -*"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote - Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."* - Nathanael's instant response was: *"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"*

Well ... yes it could ... and among the good things that came from Nazareth was Mary.

So ... picture the scene. Mary is doing whatever young girls at that time might have been doing. Preparing food ... cleaning the house ... helping in the fields. Luke doesn't give us the details, but whatever Mary was doing was suddenly interrupted by the appearance of an angel. Not just any angel, mind you, but an archangel ... the one who had met with Zechariah in the temples just six months before ... the one who said:

"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God."

I wonder what sort of image the word 'angel' conjures up in your mind? Wipe from your mind any mental picture you might have of a girly fairy in a frilly dress ... Christmas cards and school nativity plays have a lot to answer for!

This is the mighty Gabriel ... God's own messenger ... magnificent. His presence would have had quite an impact on Mary, who was not, as far as we are aware, in the habit of meeting angels. Neither was Mary accustomed to thinking herself as anything very special ... certainly not '*highly* favoured' by God, but that's what Gabriel told her:

"Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

It is not surprising, then, that Luke tells us:

"Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be."

It is all too easy for us to hear the familiar words read and not realise what sort of impact this meeting was having on Mary. Here she was, probably only about fourteen years old, or there about, expecting nothing more than getting married and settling down to live a simple life with Joseph, the local carpenter ... raising a family and doing their best to keep out of the way of the Romans.

But now this archangel, no less, appears ... and tells her that she has been specially selected by God to be the mother of his own Son. She is to give birth to the long-awaited Messiah, whom the prophets, hundreds of years before, had foretold would come; and she and Joseph were to bring him up to be the Saviour of the world ... the king who would reign forever.

"Don't be afraid", says Gabriel. *"You have found favour with God."* Right!

So ... all she needed to do now was to tell Joseph ... and her parents, of course, who would be more than a little surprised when she started to put on weight in that rather obvious way which points to a pregnancy rather than too many chips.

How would you expect Mary to react to such news?

- Astonished to discover that God had noticed her and chosen her?
- Curious about how she could be pregnant while she was still a virgin?
- Terrified of the responsibility which she was being given?

Probably all three of these. But Mary simply asks one question:

"How will this be, since I am a virgin."

... which the Angel answers by talking about the unfathomable power of the Most High God overshadowing her, so that her Son will be the Son of God.

Think about that for a moment.

Just a short while ago, Mary's ambition was nothing more than marriage and a quiet life. In the space of a short conversation, she finds she is to be the mother of God's own Son, and that her elderly aunt Elizabeth is already six months pregnant, although she has always been barren and is now well passed childbearing age.

The whole idea is crazy ... preposterous. How could this possibly happen?

Why her?
Why now?

But instead of arguing the point ... or denying the possibility ... Mary simply accepts the angel's words that '*nothing is impossible with God*', and utters the immortal words of today's Memory Verse:

"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

What an incredible model of submission to God.

Mary could have ranted about how she had everything planned out ... how she was due to get married ... how she and Joseph were working towards getting a home together ... how her parents would react when they found out she was pregnant ... how Joseph would probably dump her and look for a more suitable bride ...

... how this great idea of God's was simply going to RUIN HER LIFE!

And she would have had a point ... because from now onwards, nothing would ever be the same again for Mary.

Instead, Mary accepted the words of the angel, and offered her life to God's service.

Is that what you would have done, if you had been Mary? Or if you had been Joseph, would you have been willing to take on this woman and her child, all on the strength of a God-given dream of another angel saying "God says it's OK"?

Would we have been willing to say 'OK God ... whatever you want'? ... and are we willing to say that when God asks something demanding of us, which might mean some sacrifice or an inconvenient change in our plans?

Mary is a shining example of true discipleship:

- she responded to God's call
- she accepted God's commission
- she was faithful in God's service

... and although there were many times in her life when she didn't understand ... and there were times in her life when what was happening to her son caused her deep pain ... she remained faithful, right to the end.

So Mary went off to visit Elizabeth ... perhaps to get away from the wagging tongues of the Nazareth gossips, who would no doubt have something to say about her expanding waistline ... maybe to give Joseph some time to think and get his head around what she had told him ... and probably to receive some encouragement and reassurance from someone else who was experiencing a

miracle, and so would understand.

Mary's arrival at Zechariah and Elizabeth's home was marked by wonderful words of Holy-Spirit inspired love and praise from Elizabeth. She felt her baby, John, leap in her womb at the sound of Mary's voice. John recognised the presence of Jesus even before either of them was born ... and Elizabeth reminded Mary of the blessing which God had given her, to have chosen her as the mother of his Son ... and of the blessing of believing.

Mary's song shows a deepening understanding of what God was doing in sending his Son into the world. She speaks of:

- Glory ... because God has chosen to act by his sovereign will.
- Blessing ... because God will do great things for her and all mankind through Jesus.
- Holiness ... because God's ways are perfect and pure.
- Mercy ... because the Saviour was coming at last to help and forgive his people Israel.
- Justice ... because God is humbling the proud and raising up the poor and powerless.

Glory ... blessing ... holiness ... mercy ... and justice.

These five themes run strongly through the entire story of the birth of Jesus, and throughout his earthly ministry ... and they are also powerful themes with regard to this season of Advent, as we look forward to his coming again:

- Mary's song reminds us that when he comes again, Jesus will come in great glory, with all his angels, on the clouds of heaven ... and every eye will see him, and every knee will bow before him. His glory will be seen by every person who ever lived.
- She reminds us that he will come in blessing for all those who love him and have opened their lives and their hearts to him. God's desire is to bless his people.
- She reminds us that his coming will restore all things to holiness, because he is holy. Sin and death will be finally defeated, as all things are made new through him.
- She reminds us that he will come in mercy, to rescue the faithful from the trials of this life, and to give us a new life in his closer presence. God reaches out to us in love.
- She reminds us that he will come in justice, to punish what is evil and reward what is good. He will restore everything to how it was made to be, perfect in every way.