

Sunday 20th December 2020

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."^[a] ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"^[a] ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Hail Mary: Queen of Heaven and Queen of interrupted plans...

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Down the generations, folk have often wondered what it was like to be Mary. There are countless paintings of this meeting she has with an unasked for, unexpected messenger of God. The earliest surviving one is in Roman catacombs and probably dates back to the fourth century, but we are perhaps more familiar with those renaissance masters, who follow a more or less consistent composition.

Gabriel, normally stands on the left, facing the Mary, who is generally seated or kneeling, at least in later depictions. Typically, Gabriel is shown in near-profile, while Mary faces more to the front. She is usually shown indoors, or in a porch of some kind, in which case Gabriel may be outside the building entirely, often in a garden. The building is sometimes clearly the Virgin's home, but it is also often intended to represent the Jerusalem Temple, as some legendary accounts placed the scene there. Mary may be shown reading, as medieval legend represented her as a considerable scholar, or engaged in a domestic task that would be expected of her gender. She is shown sometimes surprised, sometimes terrified, sometimes calm and submissive. Sometimes she is shown to be joyful and confident in her calling. She is every woman and every man, who has ever been chosen by God for something which seemed both impossible and entirely necessary and right.

More modern paintings may reflect more diverse cultures reflecting the need we have to identify with Mary the whole world over, though fascinatingly, the blue garment almost always remains, as does the challenge to portray someone who is both extraordinary, and also just like us. We cannot, quite rightly, get our heads around the idea that God sends his heavenly messenger to one of us, and

perhaps equally, we cannot get our heads around the idea that she said “yes”.

This year, we can all identify with Mary.

Here is a woman - one of us - who has had her world turned completely upside down. Everything changes, her compass has shifted for ever, hinged on one piece of unasked for news. She can't even imagine what the challenges ahead will be, though she knows, surely, that it will not be an easy ride. Her plans (and yes, like all of us, she had plans) will have to be torn up. Her dreams will have to change. Her world has been turned upside down.

Nothing is like it was supposed to be – and yet she does not grieve – she celebrates – and she speaks out about how God is with all of us who have mixed up lives, unexpected challenges, and news that changes everything. with the poor, the despised, the sick and the downtrodden.

This year, we have been challenged about what Christmas means, we have been asked to pair back - to simplify - to do what seems necessary and right to us. Our Christmasses are so complicated and so bound up with multitudes of traditions and expectations, that this will be difficult for everyone in our country to work out what that means to us in practice.

But for Christians, and, indeed, for most people I am sure, the answer to “what is the most important thing to you this Christmas?” will be love, because although our country is predominantly secular now, the idea that “Love came down at Christmas” is very much a part of our nation’s understanding of this season. Love looks different in different lives and contexts, and it will be expressed in different ways. It is really important to respect the different ways in which God is calling us to show love - to our families, our

neighbours, our country - to the people we don't know, and to the people who are suffering most - your decisions may look different to those of your neighbours. It is not our job to judge, but to live our own lives according to the Spirit of love and the calling God has placed upon each one of us.

Love will not insist on jollity from those who are grieving. Christmas, despite what they say, is not just for children or happy families. Christmas is the extraordinary breaking through of heaven into earth. Such a birth cannot be anything other than painful and Mary stands with us in her steadfast determination to bear love into a broken world, whatever it will cost her.

Neither will love resent those who celebrate - because – whatever our situation – whether this year has treated us relatively well or appallingly badly – whether we are in the prime of life or bent down with our burdens – the true message of Christmas is something worth celebrating.

Mary’s song captures the truth. An echo of earlier Old Testament heroines, she thanks God for breaking through into her life. She sees that she is special, chosen, valuable. She intuitively sees that her own vocation will be mirrored by others who will bear Christ to the world down the generations. She grasps that this is news that can make the underdog leap for joy. For God is coming. And he is on their side.

God is coming - and he is on our side. He is on the side of all who suffer, all who wait, all who rejoice - he is, in fact, on the side of the whole world.

With Mary, we will trust our future to him, and welcome his love into our lives. Amen