

Sermon preached by the Rev'd.Cynthia Jackson, 4th Sunday Advent,18th December 2016, St. Mary's Wimbledon.

Today at the end of this service the Sunday School are putting on their Nativity Play. So why do we need a sermon? We need a sermon because it is only the 4th Sunday in Advent and we have another week to go to Christmas Day. During the previous three Sundays we have thought about Patriarchs, Prophets including John the Baptist but this Sunday our readings point us to Mary. Without Mary there would be no Christmas story to celebrate. Without Mary we cannot put Christ back into Christmas.

In the lectionary year of Matthew we have a different introduction to the Nativity account from that of Luke. Mathew starts his Gospel with the words:
" an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son David, the son of Abraham. Matthew links the life of Jesus with the work of God through history. (Matthew 1: 1) Matthew ends his first 16 verses of genealogy with :

"...Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." (Matthew 1:16). We start the events of the Nativity from the perspective of Joseph who became a foster father to Jesus.

Matthew is short and to the point in his story telling:

"...Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit..." (Matthew1:18)

With Matthew no angel voices telling Mary that she was to be the mother of the Son of God but just those few life-changing words...*"she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit..."* Shattering news for Mary but equally devastating for Joseph. We can only speculate on the conversation that went on between Mary and Joseph, anger, tears, incredulity. For a betrothed woman to become pregnant meant that she could be stoned for adultery. Joseph realised how scandalous the situation was but before he could start thinking about quietly divorcing Mary, the Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Joseph received direct instructions:

"...Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20 and 21)

Despite this angelic appearance Joseph must have had great concerns over Mary's welfare and the public criticism that would be poured upon her. But nevertheless Joseph stood by Mary and supported her during and after Jesus' birth.

Who is this Mary that we think about this Sunday; Mary, who has been honoured, or ignored, throughout the ages. Mary who has been made into an unreal woman by some parts of the Christian Church, made into a plaster saint and put on a pedestal sometimes by men. Used as an unreal and impossible example for women to follow,

especially if they are neithervirgins or mothers! Mary has often been made into a woman of submission and meekness, especially in patriarchal societies.

Every culture has a different image of Mary e.g. there is the Black Madonna of Poland. The pale anaemic portrayal of some of the Italian painters that we see on our Christmas cards, or the sorrowful virgins of many icons including the Vladimir Icon of Mary, Theotokos, *God bearer*.

The image I like to hold in my mind of Mary is from Pasolini's film, '*The Gospel of Matthew*', made in 1964, in black and white. Pasolini did not use famous film stars but local Italians. In fact the part of Mary is played by Pasolin's mother – so a real woman. It is to me a far more realistic portrayal.

In Pasolini's film Joseph too comes across as a strong man concerned for Mary's welfare and trying to understand what this child Jesus was to become and his own responsibilities towards him. After Jesus' birth Joseph protected Mary from Herod's plot to kill Jesus and they flee to Egypt.

Here we have two real human beings called upon to take upon them a superhuman task. Mary and Joseph are given strength from God to carry this great burden. As today we honour Mary we also give thanks for Joseph, for his courage and devotion to Mary that enabled Jesus, Emmanuel to be born and the Scriptures to be fulfilled. We give thanks too today for all men who take on the responsibility of acting as foster fathers.

As we continue our waiting this Advent may we too, each one of us, have the courage to respond to God's call like Mary and Joseph.

Let us pray:

*God of the watching and waiting ones,
 God of the shepherds adoring the babe,
 God of the wise men at the end of their quest,
 God of the angels giving him glory,
 God of Mary and Joseph,
 God made man in Bethlehem,
 Giving us the Word of Love,
 May we prepare for your coming with open hearts
 and minds
 and lovingly receive you,
 the Lord of life. **Amen.***

