

**Sermon preached by the Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, St. Mary's Church, Wimbledon, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent, 24th December, 2017.**

So who is this Mary that we think about briefly on this 4th Sunday of Advent morning before moving swiftly to celebrate the Birth of Jesus on Christmas Day? Mary is of course our own Patron Saint.

Mary, has been honoured, or ignored, throughout the ages. Mary has been made into an unreal woman by some parts of the Christian Church, made into a plaster saint, put on a pedestal and used as an unreal and impossible example for women to follow. 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 may see on our Christmas cards, or the sorrowful virgins of many icons e.g. the Vladimir Icon of Mary, Theotokos, *God bearer*.

The image of Mary that I like to hold in my mind is from Franco Zeffereilli's film, *'The Gospel of Matthew'*. Zeffereilli did not use famous film stars but Italian peasants and so a young Italian peasant girl plays the part of Mary.

In our Gospel reading today we have a flashback to an earlier event, which sets the scene for what is to follow. We have moved from thinking about the Second coming of Christ to the first coming of Christ as he is born as a human baby. Today we read of the foretelling of that event, the Annunciation. The compilers of the lectionary have used the device that many writers use to help readers understand what is happening in the present, by taking a looking at what has happened in the past.

Mary the young peasant woman, living in a small obscure village in Nazareth has an encounter with the Angel Gabriel, not any minor angel but the Chief messenger from God.

Mary, engaged to Joseph, looking ahead with excitement to the preparations for her wedding now hears the Angel Gabriel speaking to her. How astounded Mary must have been when the angel addressed her with the words,... *"Greetings, favoured one,. The Lord is with you"...*

The NRSV uses the response, that Mary was perplexed. That is probably the understatement of the year! Astonishment, dismay, amazement, fear, yes. I'm sure Mary was completely taken aback and bowled over. But as so often happens when human beings receive revelations from God there follow words of reassurance,

*"Do not be afraid."* Mary is reassured that she has found favour with God. But she is then told that she would conceive and bear a son. Not only this but that Jesus would be called the Son of the most high and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.

In the recesses of her mind Mary would probably remember what the Hebrew Scriptures had foretold about the coming of the promised Messiah.

But how could Mary begin to take on this amazing news? She asks the obvious question, *"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*, or as the authorised version puts it, *"How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?"*

How often when human beings are faced with situations that are incomprehensible they ask a practical question while trying to get their head around the extraordinary situation they find themselves in. Mary is no different.

Then comes the answer,..."*The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you. The child to be born will be holy and will be called the Son of the most high.*"...

Then we get this further piece of astounding news that Mary's cousin Elizabeth in her old age will conceive a son. To combat Mary's disbelief and incredulity she is told, *"Nothing is impossible to God"*.

Then Mary's response:

*"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* Familiar words to those who say the words of the Angelus regularly!

On the one hand we may think that this is a highly unlikely immediate reaction. Although it is the reaction that we might expect of the meek and mild and submissive image that has given to Mary over the centuries. On the other hand, we may think that Mary gives the thought out response of a mature spiritual woman?

I think maybe Mary initially may have ranted and raved as her carefully worked out plans to marry Joseph were being turned upside down. We can imagine the thoughts rushing through her mind:

What on earth would Joseph say?  
How would her family react?  
Would she be ostracised by her whole community?

Perhaps Mary wanted to shout at the angel, Go Away!, choose some other peasant girl, not me!

We may feel like that when we experience God nudging us to go in a direction we don't want to go. But if God is calling us to a special task it is as hard for us to say no to God as it was for Mary.

Yes I think Mary would probably need a lot of heart searching before being able to respond and say:

*"Here I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

But God had been preparing Mary for this enormous task, so she did respond and say yes to God. She did take on the heavy responsibility of becoming the mother of Jesus, the chosen one, the Messiah, the Son of God. Mary was obedient to God's call. Mary put her faith and trust in God so that she would be able to take on the task that had been entrusted to her.

Mary is a figure of encouragement for us all today, both women and men. Mary gives us encouragement in dark and difficult days. As Mary was given the strength she needed from God so we are given the strength we need. God of course works through people. God used Joseph to support Mary. God uses each one of us if we are willing and able to respond to his call.

So Mary having made her, 'Yes' response to God begins her months of preparation before the birth of her son Jesus.

Unlike Mary we have not got months left to prepare ourselves for the birth of Jesus, only a few hours. However, in the midst of our business, let us find some space to prepare ourselves to celebrate once again the birth of Jesus Christ, born as a human being, taking our nature upon us.

Let us open our hearts and minds and renew our faith and trust in God, like Mary, knowing that we are not alone but that God is with us. Let us like Mary respond to God's call to be used in his service.

*Amen.*