

# *“let it be with me according to your word”*

a sermon preached on the feast of

## *Mary, Mother of our Lord*

17 August 2014

at

### *st john’s*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by the Rt Revd Barbara Darling*

*Bishop of the Eastern Region*

The lections: Isaiah 61: 10 – 62:3, Gal 4: 4-7, Song of Mary, Luke 2: 1-7

O God, open your Word to our hearts, and our hearts to your Word, and give us grace to receive it, to understand it, and to obey it, for the glory of Christ our Lord. Amen

I am glad to be able to be with you today, for what will be my last time with you as the Bishop of the Eastern Region – but I hope not my last time to be here! Looking back over the last five years that I have been your bishop, there has been a lot happening at St John’s. You are the only parish where I have chaired two incumbency committees. You have had the benefit of Alison Taylor’s time with you as incumbent and the changes and developments that you made in this time. It was good to see Alison last Wednesday as she came to meet with the Archbishop of Canterbury and to be present with many bishops and other people at the inauguration of our Archbishop as Primate. Please keep praying for him with his dual responsibilities.

Once Alison was called to be an assistant bishop in Brisbane, your next incumbency committee worked hard and we were delighted when David Moore was able to come here as your new incumbent, together with his wife Judy. Meanwhile you have had a team of assistant clergy, authorised lay ministers, wardens and vestry and other volunteers to lead your parish as you seek to be a witness to this community of Camberwell and surrounds. It is a joy to come here and join in your well prepared liturgy and beautiful sacred music. It has also been encouraging to see the development of the Indonesian congregation and its growing links with the morning congregations.

As you move on into the future, you can be encouraged and challenged by the way in which Mary responded to the call she received from God, as we remember her especially in our church year this weekend. I am more used to celebrating Mary earlier in the year, when we remember the Annunciation or the messenger coming to tell Mary what would be happening to her.

This festival is kept on 25 March which has always been a special date for me – it was my mother’s birthday, and is also the birthday of several of my close friends. It is also when the members of Mothers’ Union celebrate Lady Day and each year there is a big service in St Paul’s Cathedral where we give thanks for Mary, the mother of our Lord, and for the Mothers’ Union and its ministry as well as for mother Church.

There are actually three important feast days during church history where the church remembered Mary especially - 25 March for the Annunciation, 15 August for the Assumption, and 8 September, for the birth of Mary. Through these dates and events we celebrate particularly the way in which Mary, the mother of our Lord, was open to God’s working in her life in an extraordinary way.

Luke chapter 1 shows us how God enters into the normal everyday world of the young woman Mary. In this passage we see how she is similar to many who have come before her, as she acts like a prophet. She receives a word or message from God through his angel or messenger, Gabriel. Like Abraham and Moses, she asks a question, receives an answer, and then adopts God’s vision as her own. She is the latest in a long line of God’s chosen ones, who have all done their part to prepare the way of the Lord. She is not the youngest – Samuel may have been- nor is she the first woman, because Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth all came before her. She is different, however, because of the intimate task she is chosen to do – to bear the Christ child. In some mysterious way with Mary, God was to interrupt the usual sequence of events leading up to the creation of a human being.

Luke does not begin his gospel with this encounter of Mary with the angel. Instead, he begins with the promise of another baby boy, and Gabriel's visit to Zechariah, the prospective father, rather than his wife, Elizabeth. Zechariah questions the news in a similar fashion to Mary. He is struck dumb for his lack of trust and incredulity, but Mary is given an answer. So while Zechariah is still unable to speak and awaiting the birth of his child who is to be John the Baptist, Mary responds to her news by singing the Magnificat, a song of triumph and of trust in God, which we have had as our Psalm today. When John is born, it is then Zechariah's turn to sing a song of his own. We see these two, the older man and younger woman, linked together as their sons were to be linked.

It is interesting that Gabriel does not come to ask these people if they are available for God's purposes. Instead, the angel comes to announce what God is doing through them. Their consent is beside the point, although Luke does highlight both Zechariah's disbelief and Mary's acceptance. Their tasks are not to make something happen, but to align themselves with what is already happening by the grace of God. The word is becoming flesh – their flesh – an event that will lead them to sing for joy.

When Mary has her encounter with the angel Gabriel, her whole world must have been turned upside down. She is told that she has “found favour with God” – immortalized in the Christmas carol with the words, “Most highly favoured lady”...She probably did not feel very highly favoured at this time, and was most likely shocked, surprised or puzzled. But Mary was able to respond to what Gabriel had said – at first by being troubled and wondering, then by being puzzled about practicalities, seeking to understand what seems a physical impossibility to her, then trusting and accepting what God brings to her. She responds by saying: *Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word.* Mary does not necessarily understand all that is happening, but she is trusting and obedient and willing to suffer if necessary for God. She is also willing to accept God's will, even if that will be difficult or seemingly impossible. Her quiet acceptance and willingness to let God work in her life, and to live in accordance with that decision, will affect the whole of the rest of her life.

Mary would have known about the expected Messiah, the Son of David, and the king to rule over the house of Jacob forever. She would not have expected to find a great leader in her little town of Nazareth. Mary needed to accept the word and actions of God with her, and she did so, opening herself up to be God's servant and to be obedient, even if she did not really understand.

And so we see in the Gospel reading chosen for today from Luke chapter 2, the culmination of Mary's obedience and also that of Joseph, as they travelled as required to Joseph's ancestral home of Bethlehem for the Governor's census count. In a few short sentences we read how Mary's time for birth arrived and her baby son was born in a cattle shed, because there was no room for them in the inn. Then come the shepherds with stories of angels and singing. We read that they share their story with Mary and Joseph and that Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Mary had a choice, whether to say *yes* or *no* to what the angel initially told her, whether to take hold of the unknown life Gabriel held out to her, or to defend herself against it however she could. She was the only one who could and who had to make that particular choice of whether to go ahead and bear the Christ child. Mary is called the Greek word “theotokos” in the East – that is, God bearer – because she consented to carry, to give birth to, to nurse and then to raise the Son of God. This was a unique privilege and responsibility.

We, too, have choices to make in similar fashion to Mary – even though not exactly the same. We like to think in this modern world that we are in charge of our own destiny – and management strategy urges us to make and keep to 10 year or 5 year plans. However, our best-laid plans can be blown away by a car accident or an illness in the family, by surprise babies or by aging parents, by falling in love, by separation or divorce, or perhaps by retrenchment and the economy. Both terrible and wonderful things happen unexpectedly – like earthquakes and tsunamis, or the collapse of the Berlin Wall or a peace accord in a land racked with internal fighting. We seldom know ahead of time what exactly will happen to us. Like Mary, our choices often boil down to yes or no: yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of events, or, no, I will not.

If our answer is no, we can go back to our ordinary lives pretending that nothing has happened. If our lives begin to change, we can refuse to accept this and deny that things are

changing; or we can become angry and try to return to the ways things always used to be. Alternatively, we can become bitter, and compare ourselves unfavorably with others, resenting what has happened and unable to be open to any suggestions from God's messenger that God is in this with us.

Our other option is to say yes, to listen to these strange and unexpected promptings from God, and to decide to take part in this plan that we did not choose, doing things that we do not quite understand. We, too, can join with Mary and say, in the midst of our nervousness and insecurity: "Here I am; let it be with me according to your word".

And so we, too, can be open to God at work in our lives in unexpected ways – in our relationships, at home, caring for children or grandchildren, working in the local community, in our moving from one place or one job to another, on the golf course or at church, speaking up for social justice, on holidays, or visiting someone sick in hospital or at home. We can be open to God at work as we farewell one leader - in the church or in the nation– and as we welcome another, as we have just done with our new Primate.

We can learn from Mary's desire to question how these things could happen, followed by her acceptance that God had worked miraculously with her cousin Elizabeth and could also work that way with herself. We see later as she raised her son Jesus, searched for him as a lad in the temple, watched him doing miracles and signs, healing and teaching, that she laid all these things in her heart. We see her watching in great pain and despair as her son died agonizingly on the cross; we see how his friend and disciple John was entrusted to look after his mother – with Jesus saying: Woman behold your son; and to John - behold your mother. We see Mary's continuing search to understand and support her son. We can but imagine her joy when her crucified son appears to his followers and she begins to understand some of what has been happening in his life and in her life.

A medieval mystic and theologian called Meister Eckhart wrote these words that arise from Mary's call and response, and can be a challenge to each of us today. He said: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and in my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: when the son of God is begotten in us."

Let us, like Mary, feel free to question, but not to be afraid, trusting that all things are possible with God. May this celebration of Mary and her faithfulness and trust in God be a time of renewed hope and trust in the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Elizabeth and Zechariah, and the God of Mary and Joseph, who is also the God of the members of this parish of St John's Camberwell, the citizens of Melbourne and Murwillumbah, of Perth and Port Airlie, of Charleville and Canberra, of Jerusalem and Cairo, of Egypt and Syria, as well as God of the asylum seekers and refugees, of those affected by fire, floods, cyclones and earthquakes, of those seeking to bring hope and new life to others, and to all of us here and in God's wider world.

So as we give thanks today for Mary's openness to God, her willingness to step out into the unknown, her trust and faith, may we too be encouraged to follow her example and to seek to be open to the new things that God brings to us. This will sustain and empower us as we remain open to God at work within us and within this parish. As you prepare to move on in your life here at St John's may you too, face the future with trust and obedience and the knowledge of God's presence with you and with your leaders.

Let us pray:

Loving God, who chose the Virgin Mary to be the mother of our Lord: we thank you for her trust and love, and for her ready obedience to your will.

Give us grace to follow the example of her devotion, and to serve you with pure hearts and minds: through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen