

the girl from nazareth
a sermon preached on the
feast of mary, mother of our lord
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by dr muriel porter

the lections: Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3; Song of Mary; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2:1-7

We Anglicans have had a rather ambiguous relationship with Mary. While she has always officially had a respected place in our church's calendar of saints, we have been inclined to view her with suspicion. That is sad, as she is without doubt first among the saints.

The sixteenth century Reformation that separated the Church of England from the Church of Rome rejected the excesses that had gathered around Mary over the previous centuries. The reformers and their successors decried 'Mariolatry', that is, the worship of Mary, and some of the fanciful unbiblical teachings that had grown up about her – and some of them are very fanciful indeed. For instance, claims that she remained a perpetual virgin after the birth of Jesus – despite the biblical evidence that Jesus had a whole clutch of younger brothers and sisters¹ (they must have been his cousins, is one line of argument!); and claims that she herself was born of an immaculate conception, so that she was without sin; and so on. There are many more like that.

These claims developed to fever pitch during the Middle Ages – precisely the time when clergy were being forced to stop marrying and to avoid any close relationships with women. It is hardly surprising. Celibate priests, devoid of female companionship yet hankering for the feminine, turned Mary into the ultimate safe, untouchable woman – motherly yet virginal, pure and sexless – onto whom they could project their own very human and understandable longings. More, Mary Immaculate, Queen of Heaven, could provide a feminine face for God, yet without challenging the determinedly masculine Holy Trinity they upheld.

In the process, they turned Mary into an impossible role model for women – how could any woman be like her, a virgin *and* mother? And they also created a 'holy family' that had nothing in common with struggling human families. How could they be like a family where the mother was perpetually virgin, the father was forced into permanent celibacy, and the child – an only child in this scenario – was perfect?

More seriously, this sort of fantasy theology, devised to meet neurotic human needs, meant that the real Mary of the Scriptures almost disappeared. Thankfully, she is now being rediscovered.

Who was the real Mary? For a start, her background was very ordinary.² At home in Nazareth, a small, out-of-the-way unimportant village in Galilee, the girl who would become the mother of our Lord was a hard-working illiterate peasant in a subsistence agricultural economy. Life for Galilean peasants was a constant struggle merely to survive in a world that was not only economically poor and heavily taxed, but also politically oppressed, ruled over by harsh Roman occupiers who exercised power through greedy, often violent Jewish client kings.

And she was just a girl when her life was turned upside down by the visit of the angel. Girls were married usually between the ages of 12 and 13, in a two-stage process. First came

¹ Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55-56; Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, New York: Continuum, 2003, p.195.

² Johnson, *Truly our Sister*.

'betrothal', which was a far more serious step than 'engagement' is in our culture. It was technically, legally, marriage though not yet cohabitation. That came after the second stage of the marriage process, usually a year after the formal betrothal. Luke tells us Mary was betrothed to Joseph at the time of the annunciation.³

So forget the beautiful paintings by great artists of the Archangel Gabriel encountering the Virgin Mary, exquisitely dressed, sitting quietly in an elegant, even palatial room, piously reading her prayer book. It is far more likely that this illiterate pre-teenage girl, dressed in simple homespun cloth, was busy working in the fields or in a crowded peasant household when she somehow heard the momentous news that she would bear God's son. Puts an entirely different slant on the annunciation, doesn't it?

It makes Mary's ready 'yes' to God quite extraordinary. Monumentally courageous. As Denise Levertov's poem 'Annunciation' puts it,

...The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

...Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,
only asked
a simple, 'How can this be?'
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply,
the astounding ministry she was offered...⁴

It was a difficult and painful ministry she accepted. For a start, she faced the danger of being pregnant before full marriage, which, if not for Joseph's honourable response⁵, could have meant death by stoning. Then there was giving birth in a stable, fleeing into Egypt with the baby, then her misunderstanding of her son's mission,⁶ and finally the unbelievable agony of standing by as he suffered the most gruesome of deaths.⁷

And it casts her song, the 'Magnificat', in a very different light, too. This is the revolutionary song Luke says Mary sang in response to her calling as she visited her cousin Elizabeth. We have sung it this morning in a modern translation. Look at some of the words – 'the lowly are precious in his sight; The proud beguiled by dreams of power/Divided and degraded lie:/He casts them down from throne and tower/And stoops to lift the humble high...He feeds the hungry at his board/ And sends the rich unfilled away.'⁸

These words portray the over-turning of the rich and powerful whose greed and lack of compassion, let alone brutality, oppress the poor and the weak. God, Mary's song proclaims, is on the side of the humble, the lowly – they, not the rich and powerful, are precious in God's eyes, and God has stooped to lift them high.

In Mary's mouth, these are not mere words. Mary is herself one of the 'poor and lowly'; she is one of the oppressed – oppressed by the godless powers in control of poor Galilean peasants. And yet she has been lifted to the heights by God's invitation to her, and her own courageous acceptance of it.

³ Luke 1:27

⁴ 'Annunciation' by Denise Levertov, *A Door in the Hive*, New York: New Directions, 1989

⁵ Matthew 1: 18-25

⁶ For instance, Matthew 3:21

⁷ John 19:25-26

⁸ 'Song of Mary', setting of the 'Magnificat' by Margaret Rizza

More, the powerful are cast down, and the hungry are fed. Mary and her family, subsistence farmers or poor artisans, almost certainly knew hunger. So to sing of the hungry being fed while the rich are turned away unfed, is to proclaim a very radical message indeed.

What Mary proclaims is nothing less than the message her own as yet unborn son would proclaim throughout his earthly ministry – that God’s kingdom is among us.⁹ *God’s* kingdom – a total reversal of the kingdoms of earth. She is the clear evidence of that reversal – a simple, poor anonymous country girl of no account invited to become the Mother of God.

The Church has sung Mary’s song religiously for two thousand years. Anglicans have sung it at every traditional service of evensong, week in, week out. But the words wash over us and we do not stop to think what it means for us as members of the Body of Christ to take these words seriously. By and large, we have failed to hear their call on us to take our part in lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, and denying power to rich oppressors. In other words, bringing in God’s kingdom.

And what of Mary’s ‘yes’ to God? Hers was indeed a unique annunciation, or calling, but there are others. As the Levertov poem says, ‘Aren’t there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?’ The poem continues: ‘More often those moments when roads of light and storm open from darkness in a man or woman, are turned away from in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair and with relief. Ordinary lives continue... the gates close, the pathway vanishes.’ Remember that Mary could have turned away.

Let us pray God that we will not turn away either, that we will recognise the moments of annunciation in our lives, hear God’s call and no matter how extraordinary it might seem, will have the courage, like Mary, to say ‘yes’ to the great adventure God has prepared for us.

muporter@trinity.edu.au

⁹ For instance, Mark 1:14-15