

16/8/2020 Sermon for 6-30pm Mass and Benediction at St Francis Hammerfield for the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary (transferred from August 15th)

What a joy it is to be worshipping here in this beautiful place once again after so many months, and to be celebrating the feast day of Mary, mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. I used to be a bit wary of Mary and all the strange stories about her. In recent years, especially since I've been giving an annual week's service in Lourdes, I've come to love and appreciate her very much more. But tonight, let's just focus for a few moments on what we discover about Mary from the Bible.

The first time we meet her is at the beginning of what we call the Christmas story, recorded from different standpoints by Matthew and Luke. Some scholars think it's quite likely that Luke actually met Mary, because he's buried in Ephesus and John , first bishop of Ephesus, took Mary to live with him after Good Friday.

We first meet her as a young girl, probably about 14, not wealthy or important at all, but deeply immersed in her faith. She's engaged too. That sounds too young to us but it's quite usual for that time and culture. One other very important fact we need to remember is that the faithful in those days are all hoping and praying for the coming of God's messiah. This has been prophesied and passed down the generations for four hundred years and by this time it's at fever pitch.

To this young girl, who's been taught to hope and pray for the coming of the messiah, comes a vision that totally overwhelms her. You all know the story, but let me give you one or two bits of it in a version different from what you're used to and invite you to try to hear it, as if for the first time. It begins as the angel Gabriel comes and greets her:

Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you.

Mary is alarmed but the angel goes on to tell her more about the son she is to bear, saying:

He will be great,
be called 'Son of the Highest.'
The Lord God will give him
the throne of his father David;
He will rule Jacob's house forever—
no end, ever, to his kingdom."

These are prophecies about the longed for messiah! But Mary is puzzled, asking:

But how? I've never slept with a man.

The angel answers:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
the power of the Highest hover over you;
Therefore, the child you bring to birth
will be called Holy, Son of God.

And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth has conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God.

And Mary says,

YES, I see it all now:

I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve.

Let it be with me

just as you say.

"**Yes, I see it all now**"! And there's something else that helps Mary to know it really is true. Her elderly cousin, who everyone thinks is past child-bearing, is pregnant as well! Mary takes off to see her straightaway and when they meet, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy spirit as her baby does a somersault inside her. She cries out a prophetic greeting and Mary responds with what has become one of the most famous, beautiful and wonderful songs in history---set in different languages to music by countless composers. We know it of course as Magnificat, the first word in its Latin translation, but just listen to it in this translation:

I'm bursting with God-news;
 I'm dancing the song of my Saviour God.
 God took one good look at me, and look what happened—
 I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!
 What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
 the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
 His mercy flows in wave after wave
 on those who are in awe before him.
 He bared his arm and showed his strength,
 scattered the bluffing braggarts.
 He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
 pulled victims out of the mud.
 The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
 the callous rich were left out in the cold.
 He embraced his chosen child, Israel;
 he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
 It's exactly what he promised,
 beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

You can find snatches of what Mary's saying here in different places in the old Testament. In her excitement she bursts out into a mixture of her own reactions and bits of scripture that she has by heart. People do that now! In their excitement in some charismatic churches they burst out into snatches of hymns---alleluias--lines from psalms and other scriptures. Of course Mary is unique, the girl God chose to bear the Holy one---the human face of god himself---but she's fully human too.

It's right that we love Magnificat---sing it reverently---but we need to understand just what's happening here. It's an ecstatic young girl, full of the Holy spirit, bursting out into personal joy in recognising what some of what she's learned by heart really means to her---right in the middle of her own everyday life.

In thirty years' time, her first born, will be preaching the same message---the kingdom of God where everything is turned on its head ---the rich and proud brought low--the poor and humble raised up---divine peace and justice and love at the heart of it all. It isn't new---it's what God intended from the beginning---embedded in the scriptures- --the same kingdom values that we as Christians try to live by and to share by the grace of the same Holy Spirit---confident that one day, one day there **will** be a final fulfilment.

After all this excitement we don't hear much about the next few months of Mary's pregnancy until the journey to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus. Even then we don't get any personal details, but after the visit of the shepherds and the angels we're told quite clearly by Luke that Mary kept all these things inside herself and pondered over them in her heart. A very personal statement.

When the baby's nearly six weeks old she and Joseph take him to the Temple in Jerusalem, just as all good Jews were required to do for their firstborn sons, to go through the appropriate ceremonies. And there another prophecy is given to Mary by old Simeon---that a sword will pierce her own soul. What a prophecy for such a young mother! She doesn't know what it means yet, but 33 years later, she certainly will.

After the visit of the three wise men and the time of being a refugee family in Egypt, the last thing we hear about Jesus's childhood is the trip to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, with all the village community. Jesus is 12, so this is probably his Bar Mitzvah, his coming of age ceremony. Now we see Mary as a typical anxious mum, not understanding what her almost teenage son is doing. Very human! I can identify with that! Jesus stays behind in the temple, if you remember, and his parents think they've lost him! Mary reproaches him, as any mother would, for giving them such a fright. He tells her they should have known where he'd be, and then he comes home, quietly.

For the next 18 years we hear nothing more of any of them, until at the age of 30 Jesus begins his three years of ministry. Mary takes a back seat for most of that, but there are a few more important things we hear concerning her. First there's the wedding at Cana, where a village family looks set to become a scandal. Remember, hospitality is top priority in that culture and Oh horror, they run out of wine! According to John, it's Mary who actually launches Jesus into his ministry then and there---a little bit before he feels ready! She brings the problem straight to him and he tells her it isn't his time yet, but her faith in his ability to make things right is so strong that he does act, and a village wedding, threatened with disaster, becomes probably one of the merriest on record with all that fabulous wine! And it's a great sign---one to be unpacked another time.

One day, Mary and his brothers come to Jesus to beg him to come home. He's becoming just a bit too controversial and the authorities are after him. His family are beginning to fear for his safety, but he sends them away. That must have been hard for his mother.

Then the last time but one we see her is at the cross. All the men except John have run away, but Mary and some of the other women are standing by. And Jesus, looking down from his fearful agony at his brave, loving mother, gives her into the care of John, who takes her into his own home.

Early on the Sunday morning, when the Sabbath's over, Mary's there again with the other women coming to do the necessary things to the body---worrying about how they'll roll away the stone---then astounded to find the empty tomb. We can quite reasonably believe that she'll see her beloved son again in the days that follow and we know from the book of Acts that she's there on the day of Pentecost when the church is born.

So what about all the other stories about Mary--including people who claim to have seen her over the centuries and had their lives changed as a result? All I can say is, I don't know. But looking at the results, I have to take some of them very seriously. I also have to respect fellow Christians who give Mary a much higher profile than we do. She played the most stupendous part in God coming into our world in human form. It cost her huge suffering as well as bringing her great joy. She's the most fabulous example of loving faith and obedience and it's a great privilege for us all to honour her here today. Carole Lewis.