

## Sermon for SJB and SSC on August 14<sup>th</sup>2022 eve of feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary

### Luke 1:48

Do you know how many churches are dedicated to St Mary in our diocese? It's about one fifth of all of them and two of them are in our own deanery! St Mary Old Town and St Mary Apsley.

But what do very many people in our country actually know, or even care, about Mary today? What did people know, or even care, about her when it all happened?

After all, when we first meet her in Luke's Gospel she's just a young Jewish girl- -probably about 14- -apparently quite unremarkable- - but- - deeply immersed in her faith. She's engaged too. That sounds much too young to us but it's quite usual for that time and culture.

To this young girl- -who's been taught from childhood to hope and pray for the coming of God's messiah- - comes a vision that totally blows her away. Although most of you will have known the story a long time I'd like to invite you to do with it something you might find difficult at first- - to try to come to it fresh- -to imagine you're hearing it for the very first time. To help you I'm going to ask you to listen to one or two bits of it in a modern rather loose translation, a bit different from what you're used to. Here goes:

The angel greets Mary:

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

What an incredible greeting to a humble young girl. Of course Mary is overwhelmed. What can it possibly mean? But the angel goes on to tell her not to be afraid and announces that she will become pregnant with a son 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."*

Wow! These are some of the Old Testament prophecies about the longed for messiah! But Mary is bewildered:

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

Then comes the extraordinary explanation:

*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.*

<sup>36-38</sup> *“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 responds,

*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 thought was well past having a child- -is six months pregnant! Mary takes off to see her and when they meet, Elizabeth and her unborn child are suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit’s extasy ! As the baby does a somersault inside her Elizabeth cries aloud in inspired recognition of what’s happening to Mary.

In response Mary bursts out into what has become one of the most famous, beautiful and wonderful songs in history- -set in different languages to music by countless composers. The Magnificat! So called because magnificat is the first word in it in its Latin translation- -but just listen to it in this version:

*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 bits 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 had by heart.

People still do that now you know- -in their excitement in some charismatic churches they burst out into snatches of hymns- -alleluias- -lines from psalms. It is right that we love the magnificat- -sing it reverently at evensong in beautiful old English, or in the great hymn setting we’ll use at the end of our service today, but we need to understand just what’s happening here.

An ecstatic young girl, full of the Holy spirit, is bursting out into personal joy and recognition of what some of what she has learned by heart really means to her right in the middle of her own everyday life. She has no idea of the next steps. The result of being discovered pregnant before marriage in that society was at best to make you an outcast, at worst to be stoned to death. What would Joseph say?

Would he abandon her? But after the angel's assurance that she need not fear she asks no more questions. Her answer is YES!

She could have said no. God calls and nudges and opens doors, but he never coerces. He never promises a life without trouble and sorrow but he does promise eternal unconditional love and the strength to go on with him day by day in hope and trust and self giving love wherever following him may take us. Mary's faith is at the very core of her whole being and her YES is unconditional.

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- -and even then we don't get any personal details- -but after the visit of the shepherds and the angels we are 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 is a few weeks old she and Joseph take him to the Temple in Jerusalem just as all good Jews did with their firstborn children, to go through the appropriate ceremonies. And there a prophecy is given to Mary by wise old Simeon- -that a sword will pierce her soul.

What a shocking prophecy for such a young mother! She doesn't know what it means yet- -but 33 years later, she certainly will.

We meet her a few more times in the gospel story that we don't have time to recall right now, then the last time but one is at the cross. All the men except John have run away but Mary and some of the other women are standing by.

What courage to be present at such a terrible scene! And Jesus, looking down from his dreadful agony, gives her into the care of his best friend, John.

Finally, early on the Sunday morning when the Sabbath is over, Mary is there again with the other women, coming to do the necessary things to the body- -worrying about how they will roll away the stone and suddenly astounded to find the empty tomb. We can quite reasonably believe that Mary would have seen her beloved son again in the days that followed and we know that she was present at the birth of the church at Pentecost.

So what about the other stories about Mary- -including people who claim to have seen her over the centuries and have had their lives turned upside down by her? All I can say is, I don't know, but I have seen the results of one of these encounters in Lourdes where Godfrey and I have worked and I've been amazed and forced to confront my original scepticism.

Mary's faith and willingness to be used by God- - bringing her both intense joy and intense pain- - have given hope to the world in ways she could not have dreamed of—So today I invite us all to take fresh heart from her example- -to be reassured that all those who are willing to be faithful and ready to be used in God's service- -high and low, rich and poor, in big ways or in small- -you and I included- -are already being used by God and may well be used by him in the future in ways we have not yet dreamed of. Amen

Carole Lewis