

Luke 1. 26-38.....

Today's gospel recalls the story of the Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary. So move over John the Baptist and make way for Mary. I haven't had an opportunity to preach on Mary before. How can that be?

Given the unexpected events of 2020, I can't think of a better disciple than Mary to focus on today. To help explore our different perspectives on Mary, I'm very grateful to Izzy, Enita and Carla for their contributions to this sermon. Especially at this busy time of year! I'll say some more about the questions we asked later on.

As a teenager in a Catholic secondary school, Mary seemed a removed distant figure, even though we prayed, 'Hail Mary' every day. Izzy describes this as her 'icon' role, which per-haps dominated my memories of Mary back then.

How do you picture Mary? Perhaps she is dressed in blue, unhelpfully she is often portrayed as white. I also tended to picture her with sad, shy, eyes looking downwards..... How do you see Mary? Has your picture of Mary changed through the years?

Much of the Church's traditional teaching upholds Mary as the perfect example of obedience and submission, as the lowly woman worthy enough to be chosen as our God bearer. No wonder we might struggle to relate to her....

Thankfully, alongside these unhelpful pictures of Mary, Mary has also been liberated by progressive theologians; as a strong disciple to who inspires our own story of faith.

One crucial aspect of Mary's story is that she wasn't particularly special or remarkable at all. She was a teenager, living in a rural, occupied land. She didn't earn God's favour more than anyone else.

Yet far from being passive, she proactively proclaims the reality that because God chose her, God chooses everyone. Mary chooses her 'chosenness' in her response to God in verse 38, 'Here I am the servant of the Lord:' Mary recognises the significance of her calling for the wider world.....

We heard Mary's wonderful words in the Magnificat before the gospel. Mary gives voice to the voiceless and proclaims a vision of God's more inclusive world, where the powerful are upturned and absolutely everyone is acknowledged as unique and special in God's eyes.

So, as no expert on Mary and in this spirit of inclusiveness, we sent out an email to ask people the following questions. We suggested initial responses to avoid overthinking...

Firstly we asked...

What would you like to talk to Mary about if you met her today?

Carla wanted to ask Mary:

..were you scared when you met the angel?

I love the way Mary doesn't hide her fear, yet at the same time she isn't afraid to ask questions or seek support from Elizabeth.

Izzy commented that Mary was perplexed and pondered, rather than directly saying she is afraid - 'being afraid' are Gabriel's words.

I'd love to ask how Mary manages anxiety so well, without becoming consumed by it? As Mary ponders and reflects, who do we turn with our own hopes and fears in this time?

Enita also asks how she felt and what she thought *after* the angels departed...it's certainly an abrupt ending to the gospel today. Was she all alone....we don't know if she was instantly filled with joy and thanksgiving, or does that come later? Per-haps it makes us think of life changing moments in our own lives?

Carla also wanted to ask Mary:

What people would think? Did you think you could live up to the job of carrying Jesus?

It's a fascinating question. Do we try to meet others expectations, our parents, being parents, keeping up professional appearances....but this can be so tiring and draining. Would Mary respond by reminding us that she too knew about the pressure of expectation, but therein lies the power of her message, that it's about God's grace accepting and loving us as we are ...

Enita wanted to ask Mary 'Did she cope with the neighbours?' Did they shun her? Enita's interesting question made me wonder if that's why she went to stay with Elizabeth? Was Mary's pregnancy viewed as scandalous? Was she pushed out by her community? Mary's deep faith to overcome what others thought or even worse the danger she was in, is incredible.

Izzy wanted to talk to Mary about fulfilling different roles. In Izzy's words: 'How does she manage her role as an icon in the Church with that of her role as Mother to Jesus? Izzy currently teaches in a Catholic school. It's a great question. Did Mary give God time out if Jesus misbehaved as a boy? There are countless stories of Jesus pushing the boundary as a teenager.

Being strong in our identity is an important aspect of our Christian story. Who is the real me beneath all these different roles we play, in our family, at work amongst friends? Are there times when different roles work together well or times when they seem to contradict?

(Juliet)?

And our second question was:

How might her story help you in your life today?

Izzy commented that Mary is a good Christian feminist role model. She had to agree to this happening to her and her faith was strong.

The story does raise some difficult issues about whether Mary gave her consent. We can't ignore the difficult aspects of Mary's story. There is much discussion around whether Mary is presented as being passive, whilst others view her as an activist for change and hope bearer.

As an adult I now like to picture Mary as a 'creative partner' with God. In the story we see her reflecting, seeking support and her 'yes' flows through her spirit of thanksgiving:

'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour'

Does Mary inspire us to celebrate our gifts? Which might be very different to meeting family and work expectations, it might even appear scandalous to some. Are there parts of our life, where we yearn to break free? Mary's example also reminds it's about liberating those around us, through our gifts too...

The final question was simply to ask

What words would you use to describe Mary?

Carla commented that she saw Mary as young, reliable, vulnerable yet surprisingly confident. Enita would describe her as strong and deep in faith.

What words would you like to add to this picture of Mary? Are they different to the picture of Mary which you began with?

These descriptions of Mary as strong and surprisingly confident are far from the shy, holy and submissive picture I began with.

What would you like to talk to Mary about if you met her today? How does her story inspire you?

Amen