

18th December 2016

Fourth Sunday in Advent: Mary, a lifetime of waiting.

Luke 1.26-38

Here we are waiting for the Nativity Play and I'm the warm up act. We are also waiting for Christmas, to celebrate a birth.

There was girl called Jennifer who was chosen to be Mary in school nativity play. When the angel came to visit her to announce that she would give birth to a baby Jennifer was to say: 'I am a virgin. How can this be?'

Unfortunately on the day of the production she got stage fright. Nerves got the better of her and she forgot her lines. There was an embarrassing silence. Fortunately her mother was sat on the front row of the audience. She mouthed to Jennifer her words: 'I am a virgin how can this be?'

Jennifer having seen her mother tell her this, boldly declared: 'My mum is a virgin. How can this be?'

During Advent, our sermon themes have been about waiting. Today we look at the waiting of Mary.

The last month of pregnancy is a time filled with a mass of emotions both positive and negative. The waiting is nearly over. The longed-for event is about to arrive. All the hopes and fears that have built up over nine months are about to be fulfilled; but this is accompanied with the knowledge that the only way to achieve these dreams is through the pain and suffering of labour. The future is both known (a baby is about to be born) and unknown (what the sex of the baby will be and what he or she will be like).

I must admit that although we never asked what the sex of our first two children was when we went for the prenatal scans, when Debbie got pregnant for a third time, having had two girls, I was keen to know whether we were expecting a third girl. I needed to prepare myself: Would I ever get in the bathroom again? As it turns out my teenage son spends longer in there than anyone else.

Waiting for a baby is a mixture of excitement tinged with fear, anxiety with hope. This mix of emotions can be heightened in a culture where infant and maternal mortality rates are high and pregnancy outside of marriage was shameful and threatened your exclusion from the community. Mary, like many other mothers-to-be both then and now, must end her period of waiting facing her fear with courage and optimism.

As we wait for Christmas perhaps it too gives you a mixture of excitement and fear, anxiety and hope. For so many different reasons Christmas can be a painful time for many people. Tensions and anxiety can make it a time that many people don't honestly look forward to.

It is appropriate therefore that as advent ends we spend the last week watching and waiting with Mary; remembering not only the waiting she had to do for the birth of Jesus, but the waiting she did for the whole of his life and beyond.

The famous story of the annunciation where the angel Gabriel comes to announce the news that she will bear a child is so understated. What would you have said in response to Gabriel's message that you were about to bear a child? Most people's response would have been a lot more fruity and argumentative than Mary's equivalent of 'alright then'. Perhaps the account has been pared down between the 'How can this be?' of verse 34 and the 'I am the Lord's servant' of verse 38.

It is hard to comprehend the devastation of a message like this. If Mary was betrothed to Joseph, still unmarried, she was probably in her early teens. Pregnancy outside of marriage was regarded with horror in first century Jewish

society and although it was unlikely that she could have been stoned she would have been an outcast from society and her reputation would have been in ruins.

A church in Adelaide is making a cartoon out of it: 'You're engaged, your fiancé is pregnant and you're not the father. What a Christmas! Obviously, that's from Joseph's perspective. But it sums the situation up nicely.

So how could she just say 'so let it be to me according to your word?'

How could she accept her fate with such complicity and resignation? The Bible does say that when the angel first greets her with the words: 'Greetings you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you', Mary is greatly troubled. Rather than a mild crinkle of the brow and small question mark above her head, Mary seems to have been taken aback, disturbed, unnerved, anxious, troubled by this appearance of Gabriel.

Which asks the question: what upset her so much? I guess meeting a supernatural visitor would be somewhat unnerving. But part of the answer is also in Gabriel's somewhat flowery greeting. Being called a favoured one

would raise most people's suspicion? What do you want me to do?

The phrase 'the Lord is with you' is a promise of the overwhelming and vibrant presence of God but it also indicates that Mary's life is going to be changed forever. Whenever that expression is used elsewhere in scripture it is not as some cheery gesture, or positive text complete with picture of a sunset or green meadow. It was usually to those God called to do difficult and challenging tasks. Think about Gideon about to be called to lead the Israelites against the Philistines with overwhelming odds stacked against him. Fear not the Lord is with you!

It is most probable that Mary knew this was a calling like that and it could only mean an overwhelming challenge. But her initial fear gives way quickly into bewilderment (how can this be?) and then acceptance (let it be to me'). She may not at this point grasp the world changing life changing significance of her calling but then few of us do when we say that first tentative yes to God's calling. She could almost certainly have grasped the immediate consequences of her own personal disgrace and deserves our admiration for saying yes anyway.

What seems important about Mary's calling is that she understands that being favoured by God is as much to be feared as embraced.

It's truly wonderful to be beloved by God. If some of you here do not know that, deep in your heart, then we can pray for you if you want. But knowing you are loved comes with it challenges beyond our imaginings. The life of faith is not comfortable. It is a challenge. It is an adventure but not necessarily an easy one. Mary seems to have it the right way around: the message that God has chosen her is far more frightening than what he has chosen her for.

When Jesus is born, they take him to the temple and Simeon an old priest blesses him and says to Mary '*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign to be spoken against., so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own should too.*' Luke 2. 34-35

This isn't much of a blessing, is it? Normally people are polite and positive when you turn up with a new child. 'We wish you health and happiness' and other mundane platitudes are usually uttered: not 'he's going to be trouble – you're in for a hard time'.

Yet this blessing speaks to a deep truth with candid honesty. Jesus will bring salvation but it will be divisive because not everyone will accept it. Those who oppose Jesus will have him put to death. Mary will experience this like a sword piercing her heart.

Her waiting is therefore far from over. She has faced the pain of pregnancy but the agony has only just begun. Simeon summons Mary to the kind of waiting that we all dread. We think of the waiting of those who have been given a pessimistic diagnosis. We think of the waiting of people in Aleppo for death or liberation. This is fateful solemn waiting.

But Mary may have learnt profound lessons through the waiting of pregnancy that this kind of waiting requires a depth and quality beyond all types of waiting and in this kind of waiting we discover the silent brooding presence of God who lingers with us in our agony. The Lord is with you.

It can be in this waiting, from which we cannot escape so easily, that we discover that God has been present all along.

After Jesus dies on the cross and is raised to new life and ascends to heaven, Mary is mentioned in Acts 1.14, as still waiting, in prayer, for the outpouring of the Spirit at

Pentecost. Even when she doesn't have to wait, she chooses this time to wait. Prayerfully and expectantly. Perhaps her skills in waiting; for the good – the birth of the Son of God; and the bad: the death of her beloved Son – had prepared her well for this final climactic act of waiting for God's Spirit and that she taught the other disciples to wait for the Spirit. Waiting enabled this to be made possible.

In common with much of Christian life, waiting laid the foundations for what was to come. Sometimes we are thrown back into waiting because we find ourselves unable to do anything else, but other times particularly if we are practiced in God driven, active, expectant waiting, then waiting can flow out of who we are and what we do and gives God the space to intervene in the most surprising and world changing ways. We can find meaning in the waiting.

Be warned. An angel may say to you: The Lord is with you. Then wait and see what happens.

Bibliography: Paula Gooder, *The Meaning is in the Waiting*, Canterbury Press 2008