

## Advent 4 19<sup>th</sup> December 2010

### Mary

Through Advent we have been looking at waiting through the experience of men and women like Abraham and Sarah and John the Baptist and most recently Mary. For Abraham and Sarah it was a waiting that strengthened faith that God would deliver on God's promises, even in the most unlikely circumstances.

Furthermore you couldn't hurry God along by trying to fulfil the promise yourself without dire consequences. John showed how waiting is a time of preparation to encounter God. The preparation requires our turning to God and remaining attentive to God so that we recognise the one we are waiting for when he comes. Mary adds to the variety we see here.

As Luke relates it she is called by God through a visitation by the Angel Gabriel who greets her, a young village girl as if she was someone highly important - *Greetings, highly favoured one. The lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.* She is as disturbed by the greeting as by the message that she is going to have a baby in a way that will endanger her marriage and therefore the rest of her life. And she argues. By the end of the encounter with Gabriel she is able to say 'OK then' as Paula Gooder puts it and it sounds fairly subdued. I think we could all be fairly subdued by an encounter like this. But I wonder about that. Greek has a form of the verb called the Optative which expresses willingness

and desire - the verb here is in the Optative. It is more 'may this happen' than 'let it happen.'

Three months later she visits her cousin Elizabeth who is six months pregnant with John and in that encounter bursts into the Magnificat, a song which we still sing today. It is all about the reversals that happen when God gets involved in the world we live in. the great and mighty are displaced, the poor and hungry are fed, and the lowly are raised up. It is like a description of society if everyone lived justly and lovingly. It is a description of peace as deep as the descriptions of peace we have been listening to in the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures over the past few weeks - weapons turned into agricultural implements, the vulnerable lying down in peace with predators. Mary comes from a village that would have been relatively poor and which would have suffered from the huge building of cities by Herod and Roman governors along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Local people in the towns and villages would have been exploited and many lost their livelihoods. The news that the messiah was going to be born would have been encouraging, exciting with that frisson of the knowledge that pain and suffering could be part of the deal, all at the same time. Light shines in the darkness bringing hope.

When the baby is born Luke tells the story in such a way that people of his time would have understood the revolutionary and subversive nature of the story.

The titles given to Jesus, Lord, saviour, son of God, bringer of peace and so on

had been claimed by Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor and carved into monuments in the provinces of the empire. His peace had been achieved through winning a violent 9 year civil war that had stretched from Spain to Egypt.

Writing like this Luke raises the question in listeners' hearts - who is Lord, who is saviour who is King? In further contrast to the ways of the world where pomp and ceremony are important, Mary bears her child in a stable and hears the story of the shepherds and ponders everything in her heart - an invitation to us to ponder on how God reveals God's power and will not to the powerful but to those who are despised and are on the margins. Mary's story is intimately entwined in the very subversive story of the Christian Gospel, a story often of passive resistance to oppressors leading to liberation.

When Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple to perform the rites for the firstborn we see another kind of waiting. Two old people, Simeon and Anna, who have been looking for the coming of the messiah, recognise a couple with a baby entering the temple as what they have been waiting for. They will have had to have spent much time in God's presence to see through God's eyes what would be hidden from nearly everyone.

Simeon prophesies over the child and the prophecy is two edged. what would it be like to hear these words spoken over our children? *This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed,* and adds to Mary *A sword will*

*pierce your own soul also.* It is clear from this that the messiah will not be universally welcomed. He will be strongly opposed and the statement that Mary herself will find her own soul pierced suggests that this messiah will die before his mother.

Simeon and Anna are gem like people who know God deeply and are known by God. By waiting on God over years they acquire the insight and ability to recognise where and how God is at work among God's people and in the world. In some parishes it is the older people at the early service who often the ones who see the need for the church to be engaged with God's mission. One of the stories of our day that inspires me comes from a fresh expression type of church plant in Banksia Grove north of Wanneroo. There a group of people moved in to the suburb with a view of getting involved with the community in such a way that they didn't attract converts out of the community into the church. They became like yeast within the community. One of their weekly practices was to meet to review what was going on in the community in prayer - cheering where they saw God at work, praying for difficult situations, and through listening to God discerning where they were to get involved personally - recognising they couldn't and shouldn't do everything. We need Simeon's and Anna's in our congregations and perhaps we have them.

I am sure that this point in the story Mary is not daunted by the task or the prophecy. The person who sang the Magnificat is not going to be daunted by suffering. She stands in a line of Jewish women who over the previous few centuries had been prepared to die for their faith and encourage their sons and daughters to die for their faith in times of deep persecution.

From here on Mary seems to recede into the background largely but she is around - rather like a Jewish Mama she turns to her son to fix a potentially shameful disaster at a wedding; and she is there at the foot of the cross when Jesus is crucified; who is there with the disciples at Pentecost, and therefore presumably through all the post resurrection episodes following Jesus' death and burial. In icons of Pentecost she appears in the centre and is prominent among the disciples - like a mother now to the church. And perhaps that is what Jesus meant when he said to the beloved disciple *behold your mother*, and to his mother *behold your son*. Some commentators have suggested that the beloved disciple is anyone who follows Jesus. There is some truth in that also suggested in Jesus statement that whoever does God's will is his mother and brother and sister. For us I think church can be like all the good aspects of motherhood (recognising that not all we do as parents is ever perfect). Like Mary we can turn to an individual and ask him or her to help out in a crisis. I think we should nurture discipleship like she nurtured Jesus in the faith. And I think like her and some other women we should be standing with those who are killed by

systems that are very unjust. Black Sash women in South Africa during the apartheid era were like that. Joseph of Arimathea in asking for the body and burying Jesus makes an amazing symbolic statement of identity with Jesus in very dangerous circumstances. Sometimes all we can do is symbolic while we wait for God's justification of the innocent, which will come, as Jesus' resurrection proves.

Mary for me is not an image of purity, nor is she much like the pictures we have on our Christmas cards - which often romanticise birth and clothe Mary and Joseph in rich clothing. She is feisty, courageous, prepared to wait even in suffering for the redemption and liberation of her people. Inspiring.