

The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

Sermon

Sunday 24 December 2023: Angela Hannafin

Good morning and welcome to our Christmas Eve sofa sermon. Today we're reading from the famous narrative from Luke's first chapter – let's hear it now.

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. ²⁸ Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings favoured woman! The Lord is with you!" ²⁹ Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. ³⁰ "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favour with God! ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!" ³⁴ Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." ³⁵ The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. ³⁷ For the word of God will never fail."

³⁸ Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

Have you ever listened into other people's conversations? It used to be that you were thought of as nosy or intrusive if you did. In Luke's gospel we are allowed to overhear a conversation that took place between the angel Gabriel and Mary. It's a famous conversation and we've heard it so many times since childhood it's hard to approach it with fresh eyes and ears. Each of the gospel writers crafted their gospels with chosen conversations and words to communicate something different to us. And God has something new to say to us today through this scripture, familiar though it is to us, as the Holy Spirit speaks to us.

All the four gospels have different 'flavours', or themes that keep coming up. In Luke's gospel, written by a doctor, there is a specific focus on the body and physical things, on healing and on marginalised groups in the ancient world, such as women. Here, Luke tells us that Mary was young, perhaps 15 or

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16 when she met this angel. She was also unmarried and virginal. This ordinary woman found herself encountering a supernatural agent of God. Is there any wonder she was confused by the news that she had found favour with God and would conceive a child who would be the Son of the Most High, and who would reign over Israel. The angel was describing the arrival of the Messiah, said to come through the Holy Spirit. The angel also references Elizabeth, Mary's older relative, who has become pregnant possibly after menopause. If Mary needs assurance she only has to look to her own family for the presence of God. For the word of God will never fail.

Mary's response is so beautiful, so simple, so full of faith and such an example to us all, and it's her reply which is at the heart of this gospel section. Whilst Mary is young, uneducated and powerless, she gives an answer which has been studied by scholars over the centuries and which elevates her to be one of the most revered females. Mary who has nothing responds with everything she has to God. She is our supreme example of trust and faith. She hands over her entire future to God, and considering how young she is, this is astonishing. "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true". Or as some translations say, "Let it be to me according to your will". Of course if we read the preceding chapter, we need to remember that Luke is showing us something deliberate. This is the second visit of Gabriel to someone with news about important children to be born. The first visit was to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, with the news that Elizabeth would have a child, despite this having been considered a medical impossibility. Gabriel is telling Zechariah, what man considers impossible, God can do! However Zechariah's response shows that he didn't really understand and lacked faith. As a result, he was unable to speak through the rest of Elizabeth's pregnancy. I think Luke wants to give us a 'compare and contrast' as the exam questions say. He wants to show us what happens when people respond with faith. Mary reacts in a completely different way to Zechariah. She doesn't doubt, takes God at face value, and her question, how can this happen, is more about the practicalities than doubting what has been told to her.

Through Mary we see what God is really looking for. Not people who are intelligent, and well-read or charismatic. Not wealthy people or talented or skilled people. These are all good things in themselves but God is searching for people, any people, who can hear God, who can respond to him and say yes. Not a yes with conditions. Just a simple 'yes' like Mary's giving all she had to God. This is what God wants from us again. To turn to him and put our

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trust in him. It's so simple, but requires our whole heart and mind and soul and takes a lifetime to perfect.

This is such a hopeful passage to read at the end of such a difficult year. When our world seems so far away from keeping God at the centre, when we have seen the horror of war close up, and when our hearts have been broken by so much pain and suffering in our world, God is reaching out to us this night/day to invite us to follow him. The gospel, the good news of the Messiah, has come into the world through the birth of Jesus Christ, and now we can live with God in peace. It won't guarantee us a pain-free life, but we know that God is with us in everything because Emmanuel, God is with us, has come to earth from heaven. As we reflect on the words of Mary, God invites us to put our trust in him again to face all that lies in 2024.

May our pilgrimage this next year allow us to trust God more deeply and to hear his voice more clearly so that the glory of God may be seen in our lives.
AMEN.