

MARY COULD HAVE SAID “NO”

Sermon for Advent 4 - the Sunday before Christmas

Here we are at the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Already we have had Carol services, end of term services and all the paraphernalia of Christmas is upon us. But not quite. We are still in the time of looking forward, and of reflecting about salvation - how it happened, what it means and the final return of the King.

We have spent time looking at John the Baptist, his birth and his work in calling people to repentance. We learned that he was the last in the great line of Old Testament prophets, and stood as a second Elijah, a figure looked for by the Jews of the day. Some still do.

Have you ever thought of the similarities of the arrivals of John and Jesus. This may not have struck you before so let me run them past you:

The Angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah to announce John
Gabriel came to Mary

Zechariah was startled - Mary was startled

The message to Zechariah was 'Hail ...'

The message to Mary: 'Hail Favoured one'

'Do not be afraid' - this was said to both

'Elizabeth will bear you a son' - Mary 'You will conceive and give birth to a son'

'You will call him John' - 'You will call him Jesus'

He will be great, etc. - He will be great, etc

'How am I to know this?' Says Zechariah

'How can this be?' Says Mary

The sign for Zechariah was that he was to remain dumb until the naming of the child. The sign for Mary: Elizabeth is pregnant

Interesting isn't it - the parallel tracks that both the striking figures have.

The other day I read as a Gospel reading what I used to call all the 'begats' from Matthew 1 - you remember? It starts: The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham begat Isaac; and

Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; and so on: 42 generation up to the birth of Jesus, according to Matthew. One reason that the complete genealogy is put in is to satisfy the legalistic Jews that Jesus - of the house and lineage of David - was 'the one'. All nice and legal - prophets foretold him - here he is.

However, to me it speaks of the careful preparation of the Jesus project. It had been planned, announced, plotted in the stars from the very beginning.

But here in our Gospel reading we have the moment when it could all go pear shaped. You see, Mary didn't HAVE to say 'Yes'. She really didn't.

The angel started by saying some really dangerous things - things that could get you killed. Gabriel talked about a coming King. As a man, Jesus preached about the coming kingdom, which became a threat to those in authority and power.

Jesus was not crucified because his birth disrupted broke biological rules, but because some people thought he was a threat to their political and religious power.

The dangerous part of Jesus' birth is not the virgin conception, which was thought of as possibly quite normal for heroes of the age, but that the king of the Jews would be born to such a poor family in an insignificant scruffy little town on the very edge of Israel. *If* a king were to be born, surely he should be born to high ranking, wealthy parents who could provide him with all the finest things? Shouldn't he be born and grow up in Jerusalem -- the city of God?

This really dangerous, and frankly to a good Jew, offensive aspect of the birth is even more significant when we are told repeatedly that this child will be called "Son of the Most High" and "Son of God".

Mary was much perplexed at the angel's words. Her reaction "much perplexed" literally means "to be deeply confused or troubled" is surely the normal reaction at seeing an angel. The shepherds on the hills were quite simply 'terrified'. When Zechariah sees the angel, "he was terrified" . When

the risen Jesus appears to the women, he asks, "Why are you terrified and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" This shocking fear of the unexpected and unknown would surely grip all of us, even though we are the Star Trek generation who are used to thinking about beings beaming up and beaming down - even though we are the Harry Potter generation who know all about wizards being able to apparate. When it happens for real - now that is when it really IS terrifying.

Mary's response to the unexpected and in-her-face encounter with God in her kitchen and in her life is simple. Despite almost as if she doesn't think about it. She puts herself at God's disposal: "Behold the Lord's slave; let it be to me according to your word". This is in sharp contrast to Zechariah's response as reported by the angel in 1:20: "But now, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

The word "logos" appears in this passage. Luke in fairly sophisticated Greek gives these words to the angel: "No word, No Logoi, will be impossible with God." And we begin to see a play on words with the word 'word' itself. Be it unto me according to your Logos - your word.

And it falls to John, many years later, to unpack the full meaning of the Logos as it applied to Jesus, the Christ.

Eduard Schweizer Bible Scholar wrote this in his commentary *The Good News According to Luke*: "In Mary, humanity is represented as the recipient of this life and love from God. With her quiet awaiting of God's act she is the figure of Advent, the opposite of the nervous activity of modern society." And that was 50 years ago.

Mary becomes the model of properly responding to the in-breaking of God and God's Word into our world.

But remember - she could have said 'no'. God's whole humanity thing began to get out of hand with the gift of free will. He gave Men and women the ability to turn away from Himself and reject his love if they want to. There is never any compulsion. And God's plan of salvation had no compulsion inherent - she

could have said 'No'.

It is OK to say to yourself: well God is Almighty, he knew that she was a push over, he knew she would say 'Yes'. But that is not so. God does not control our choices - he did not control Mary. She could have said 'No'. Jesus could have said 'No' right at the last minute in Gethsemane. It is an interesting lesson - God trusts us. God puts his faith in us.

The danger of the enterprise, the risk that God took was under-girded by such love that God might be said to have loved the plan into fruition. So much could have gone wrong: a simple germ killed so many little children. The soldiers might just have found him in the slaughter of the innocents. The Jesus project was a risky, unwise strategy - in our terms. But what seems to be folly to men and women is the wisdom of God.

Mary could have said 'No', but she didn't. Jesus calls you today - to turn back to him. Of course you can say 'No'. But I pray that you will have the quiet acceptance of Mary, as you see what wonderful things God has lined up for you this Christmas.