

GOD WANTS YOUR SACRIFICE

Blessed Virgin Mary - preached at the Church of St Mary the Virgin Holystone, on their Patronal Festival, 17 August 2008.

Today we are thinking about Mary. This church is dedicated to St Mary the Virgin.

In the ancient church Mary was called theotokos. Theotokos is made up from two Greek words, and means that Mary was chosen by God to be the bearer of God. That is, she carried Jesus in her womb. That she became pregnant by miraculous means, and that this child was fully God and fully human.

These are amazing statements, and many people find them very hard to understand or to accept. So let's first of all try to get closer to the human side of the story.

Before we come to the text of our Gospel today, we recall that two women, not only kin but now drawn by a common experience, meet in an unnamed village in the hills of Judea. The one woman is old and her son will end an old era; the other is young and virgin and her son will usher in the new.

Even the unborn John responds to this great truth and leaps in the womb when Mary enters. And in words inspired by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth blesses Mary as "the mother of my Lord" and as one who accepted in faith God's promise spoken by the angel.

Our Gospel reading gives us Mary's response to this greeting. She sings her great song – and over the years the church has sanctified and removed it from the simple context. It has many marvellous choral settings; it is read every day in the office of Evensong.

But we forget that it was first proclaimed in a little unnamed hill town when Mary was staying with her Aunt. She went to a place away from her immediate family of Anna and Joachim, to be with an aunt and an uncle. She heard that her old aunt was pregnant.

But Mary went there to get her head round the problem the angel had set her. Yes - Mary had heard an angel speak. Imagine if you were Mary. I know that is hard for most of us, but try.

She is all of 13 years old. The angel of God told her that she would give birth. There would be nine months of snide remarks, of nasty gossip. There was the very real possibility that the town elders would take her out of town and kill her - stoning her to death for immoral behaviour.

I have two daughters. What would I have said if one of them had come home at 13 years old to tell me that she was pregnant...and had never been with a man?

Yes...this young country lass believed what God said. Yes...Mary said to God, "Behold the servant of the Lord."

But Mary was no fool. She knew that this was not normal. Far from it. She knew that all the people of the town would start talking. So she went to the hill country, to a place where she was relatively unknown and the questions would be far fewer. There she could go and avoid the embarrassment, shame, and danger.

At 13 she was considered to be a grown woman, but still a child. And inside this child's head there were thoughts and hopes and fears and doubts all churning round. And is it true? and is it true? The most tremendous tale of all, Seen in a stained-glass window's hue, A Baby in an ox's stall? The Maker of the stars and sea Become a Child on earth for me? John Betjeman, *Christmas*:

Surely there had to be some doubt. Perhaps some of the doubts would fade later, because the angel had also told her that Elizabeth - at maybe 50 or 60 was also pregnant. That was unheard of. Yes, going to Aunt Elizabeth would help settle some of her doubts. Going and seeing Elizabeth would confirm what she had heard from the angel.

She stayed with her aunt and uncle three months. Just long enough so that when she got back home people would know she was pregnant. Her doubts must have been overcome by then.

And Mary gives a sacrifice. This isn't a sacrifice in the temple, but "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." This was her sacrifice to God, and what a costly sacrifice it was. Would Joseph believe her? If he didn't that could be the sacrifice of a marriage. It would take away the hope of a semi-comfortable life. It could be the sacrifice of her life as well. Sacrifice - on the altar of her word - could be a life - or marriage - the wedding she had hoped for, as many young girls did, and do. You see, she didn't know that Joseph would hear the voice of an angel as well, to help him accept this outrageous situation. After all, angels are not something you run into every day.

She sacrificed a lot because of that voice and vision of God. The punishment for having sexual intercourse outside of marriage was severe. No, it wasn't always meted out - but often enough that the daughter of an orthodox family had a reason to be afraid.

Pastor Abrahamson - yes, that is his real name - is a Lutheran Pastor. He was raised as an orthodox Jew. He came to hear the call of Jesus as his saviour, and eventually God led him into the ministry. Yet the rest of his family are still practising Jews. Had it been possible on the day of his ordination, his family would have stoned him. Instead, they had a funeral. He was declared as dead to them. His name is never spoken out loud in the home he grew up in.

Mary had that much danger. This was something she had to come to terms with. So Mary, by saying "let it be to me as you say," risked her good name being and reputation, her marriage prospects and faced a life which could have been as an outcast, her good name changed to a cursed name.

Yes, Mary sacrificed much, and realizing that she was called to sacrifice, went to her old, trusted, wise, gracious aunt. Mary was called to risk much, and to sacrifice much. We too are called to sacrifice ourselves for God.

Most of us, I expect, will think of sacrificing things or money. You know, like: What will you give up for lent? But that is not the first sacrifice that God wants. The sacrifice God wants is for us to say: "here I am Lord, it is I."

This takes us right back to the story of little Samuel in the temple “Speak Lord, here I am it is me” – and the song that Mary sings as she realizes, from what her aunt says to her, that this really is going to happen as God said, and it is something to sing about and not to run away from.

Mary’s open acceptance of god’s plan is an amazing sacrifice, and it leads not to sorrow and fear, but to an outburst of song and praise. A celebration. It was through Elizabeth’s words that Mary was able to go back home. Mary was then able to celebrate, knowing that she was acceptable, not needing to be filled with shame.

Perhaps we are afraid of this - to hear from Mary - to hear from Elizabeth and Jesus - that God does expect sacrifice from us. "Here I am Lord, It is I Lord?" "Behold, the servant of the Lord."

The sacrifice of Mary was to accept God’s will, to open her whole young life for God to do with what he had planned. She could have said ‘No’, and perhaps the trip to Aunt Elizabeth shows the doubts might have been rising and growing.

Had she done the right thing? Had she imagined it all? And was it true? In a moment we shall celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as the plan of our salvation rolled on. And in the context of the Eucharist we pray: And here we offer and present O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice.

So we are now here today. We celebrate the sacrifice of Mary, yes and of Elizabeth too, and principally the sacrifice of our great Lord God who became man to die for us.

Mary - as well as Elizabeth - teaches us that God wants our surrender. Like Mary he calls us to say simply: ‘Do what you want with me’. As we open our lives to the will of God, we too shall break into that same song of Mary: Our sacrifice will lead to celebration. "My soul glorifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour". For to be doing the will of God is the greatest work that any of us can and will ever do.

