

Advent 4, Mary, Luke 1:26-38

So, here we are on the fourth Sunday of Advent, the last bit of Advent before we plunge into Christmas later this week but also later today at our carols services on Zoom. And today we are doing the last bit of Advent, traditionally when we think of Mary the mother of Jesus.

So lets just stay with Advent for a little bit longer, before we dive into Christmas. Advent, is that period of waiting and watching, and week by week we look at some key characters from the bible. Reminding us that for God's people, waiting and watching for the coming of God, for the coming of the Messiah, has always been part of life. The patriarchs and prophets, John the Baptist and today Mary.

I wonder what your image of Mary is – what picture is conjured up in your mind when you think of the mother of Jesus.

What words spring to mind?

Serene, calm, full of peace. Almost God like, not especially real. Bearing her part in God's plan with an almost dream like quality, calmly, trusting. And so with Mary, we perhaps see the stained glass window Mary, the Renaissance Painting of Mary, the icon Mary or the statue in an old church Mary.

Does that make Mary a figure that we find hard to relate to? Some special figure, practically God in a way, always with a halo, always with that half smile on her face. Called by God to be the mother of the Jesus.

But when we really stop and look, I think Mary is a figure that most of us ought to be able to identify with – this year more than ever. Yes she was called to be the mother of the son of God and we are unlikely to be asked to do this. Yes she has become an icon, a statue, an extraordinary character and perhaps we will never find ourselves elevated to such a position. But perhaps as we think about waiting, maybe we find some familiar emotions in Mary, maybe we find a similar challenge to trust God with our lives, with our futures, our waiting.

We know why Mary is left waiting and what she is waiting for. She is told she will bear a son. All of us who have had children, indeed perhaps especially those who longed for children and never had them, know about waiting. The waiting of pregnancy is exactly the kind of waiting I think we need to think about in Advent. Not a passive waiting, a sitting twiddling our thumbs until such time as the baby decides to be born. But an active waiting, a time of preparation albeit with a high degree of uncertainty and anxiety.

And I come back to the words of a favourite Christmas Carol of mine, quite profound words. Something about Mary's experience, and I think ours too, is captured in some of the words of O Little Town of Bethlehem. Not the first words but some way in - 'the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight'.

The waiting in pregnancy is a time of hope - Full of hope for all that this child is going to be, is going to bring. But pregnancy can also be a time of fear - will I make it to full term, will the baby be OK, will it hurt, can I do this, how do I be a parent, what kind of world am I bringing this child into, what will the child become. A time of hope and a time of fear.

For Mary, the annunciation was an unexpected turn of events, there was a lot of the unknown ahead, life going in a way that she had not expected. The context may be different for us but the emotions and experiences are probably familiar to us all.

So what are we to do? Well back to the carol, it is not hopes or fears but hopes and fears. It is all too easy to think that fear is bad and to be banished if at all possible, and hope is good and to be sought after. But I do not think it is so simple. I think it is nigh on impossible to have hope without a little bit of fear, without a little bit of the unknown.

What I find so wonderful and challenging about Mary, is her response. She is definitely frightened, but she faces that fear with huge courage and faith with those wonderful words I am the Lord's servant.

Its as if she says, despite this shock, despite this turn of events, despite my fear and anxiety and despite what everyone will say, I will trust God. In the fear, in the unknown and the unexpected, there was room for God to come in. I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me according to your word. Fear, yes, but coupled with faith and courage which brings with it, hope.

Of course Mary was afraid and despite her words of courage and hope, I don't think the fear disappeared as she said I am the Lord's servant, I can't imagine that was the end of her fear. Think about what happened to her, a tricky pregnancy and a fiancée to sort out, a pregnancy, a long journey, inadequate accommodation, giving birth, visitors, threat of losing that precious baby, the responsibility of bringing up a child and a jolly special one at that! And yet there is hope, Mary, in her fear quite literally carried hope, carried Jesus, the hope of the world, Jesus the light breaking into the darkness of a fallen and broken world. To a fearful young girl in an uncertain and desperate situation, Jesus, the hope of the world came. Jesus, Immanuel, God with us. Even in our fear.

The angel's message to Mary, 'Fear not, God is with you' is a repeated message for the Christian faith.

It is there from the beginning, in the words of the prophets to captive Israel, in lonely exile: 'Fear not.'

It is there for old Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, who cannot believe his wife, Elizabeth, in her old age, is pregnant: 'Fear not.'

It is there when the angel visits Joseph to tell him his young fiancée will have a child: 'Fear not, Joseph.'

It is there on the hillside when the heavens open and a group of shepherds are startled by glorious light and an angel chorus: 'Fear not. I bring you tidings of great joy.'

And it is there years later when heartbroken, frightened disciples go to the tomb on the first day of the week in the early light of dawn: 'Fear not. He is not here.'

And it is here now, as we draw close to the end of a challenging year.

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Hopes and fears. I think instead of thinking about them as two words, two distinct and separate emotions, lets be content with keeping them together – 'hopesandfears' – all one word. Because I think they co-exist quite well and especially as we think about Mary, pregnant and full of hope and fear for her child.

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