

Session 5: Jesus Christ

Main readings: Luke 1.26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵ The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸ Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Theme: Turning to Christ

What is our vocation – as individuals, and as 'the body of Christ' – the church in communion?

Reflection

As some of you will have heard me preach before, I have always balked at the idea of little Mary, meek and mild, and often refer in speaking of such things to the rather extraordinary statue of Mary at the Magnificat in the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral – you can see a picture here: <https://www.elycathedral.org/about/history-heritage/the-lady-chapel>

Her sense of vocation – the calling of God on her life – must have been profound and powerful, and as we have explored, it is only when we hear that deep call that we are able to do the things – in the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than our own strength – that we might have otherwise thought simply impossible.

But you are perhaps wondering why, when this session has 'Jesus Christ' as its main character, we have a reading about Mary.

Firstly of course is that today we celebrate the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin – one of the principal Holy Days of the Anglican Church.

But secondly, it is because we are moving swiftly and inexorably, during this last period of Lent, towards the story of the crucifixion and death of Jesus. And for this crucifixion and death to occur, there needs must be the incarnation!

Growing up in history, Jesus was 'the Son of the Most High' and 'the Son of God', but also a young male Jew. King David had been promised a house (a family line, rather than a building) by God and the adoption, by the devout and kindly Joseph, of this child born of the Spirit, brought this prophecy to fulfilment for the Jewish people and also 'all the nations'. His mother pondered all these things as she gave her 'fiat' – her 'yes' to God, and was alongside Jesus as further prophecies were made, as he began his ministry, and as he brought it to its horrifying fulfilment on the cross.

It must have felt like the end. In our Good Friday ecumenical service in Calais we will hear an agonising perspective from Mary as Jesus is taken down from the cross. We know the disciples were devastated – they went back to doing what they had done before Jesus came into their lives. But we are blessed indeed – we know the next part of the story: that through that horrific death Jesus inaugurated a Kingdom that was 'not of this world', and through his astounding resurrection he calls all to be a part of it as heaven and earth are reconciled in the new creation.

Professor N.T. Wright, in his excellent book 'The Day the Revolution Began' explores in some detail what this call is about. He describes how we are all called, as humans, to be 'image-bearers' of God in God's creation. This means that our primary duty, as for all that God created, is to worship and sing the praise of the Creator. But we are also to be good stewards, and reflect and offer God's wise and compassionate care for all creation.

As Wright explains, when we turn away from that calling, when our first call is not to the worship of God, and we do not act as reflections of God's compassion and mercy in the world, then we find we are in fact worshipping something else, be it power, money, status....anything else, in fact. Idolatry – turning away from God – is the root of sin. Caught up in the enslaving net of other, worldly powers, we lose our grip on true life as our eyes lose sight of the Lord of life. Death, and exile from the loving gaze of God, is the inevitable result.

But Jesus, the most perfect image of God, through whom God is made known to us as humans, conquers the power of physical death by his resurrection. Our fear of death is at the root of so many of our fears. Jesus tells us time and again 'Do not be afraid', and assuring us of God's loving mercy, ascends to the Father to plead for us, and to restore humanity to the place God had always intended us to be: close alongside and deep in the presence of Love itself.

In the meantime, the Kingdom which Jesus begins through his saving work on the cross is now and not yet. But make not mistake – it is not a future event, it is begun, and we are called to be a part of it. This we do by realising our true vocation as children of God, infinitely precious, perfectly unique, 'wonderfully made' outpourings of love that we each are. As we recognise this not only in ourselves, but also in one another, we will find we are freed to join the everlasting dance of love and joy of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and truly serve the God who calls us back home.

Questions for discussion

- What word, or phrase, or idea in this reading has particularly struck you in your time of reflection or on hearing it today?
- We later hear Mary's boldness in the Magnificat which has echoes of Hannah's song and has been seen as radical and revolutionary. What makes her so bold in this call?
- 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord'. What would it mean to you to express that 'fiat'?

- How can church embody – be the incarnation today – of the new creation, the Kingdom of God, in the here and now?

Other resources you may like to explore:

Scripture: 1 Sam 2.1-10 Hannah's song
 Luke 1.46-55 The Magnificat;
 The Letter to the Hebrews

Art: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_of_Saint_John_of_the_Cross

(usually on display in the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow – but it does go on tour, so if you get to see it in 'the flesh' do go!

Music: Voces8 sing 'The Angel Gabriel from heaven came'
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAsLEYWtIkY&list=RDEAsLEYWtIkY&start_radio=1

'My Redeemer lives' – Resound worship
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0-Doy2xRgs&list=PLSqCw4A9wlwo5-L0Eyu7AJj89ItS8n0qZ&index=14>

Open the eyes of my heart Lord – Paul Baloche]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fm-zb-AH8Xc&list=PLSqCw4A9wlwo5-L0Eyu7AJj89ItS8n0qZ&index=15>

Reading: Poetry and reflections by Ann Johnson, 'Miryam of Nazareth'
 Andrew Jones, 'Mary: A Gospel witness to transfiguration and liberation'
 Tom Wright, 'The day the revolution began'
 Ed. Tom Holland 'Revolutionary: Who was Jesus? Why does he still matter?'

