

Fourth Sunday of Advent 2017

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Luke 1: 26-38

From St. Luke's gospel, chapter 1: "Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the lord; let it be with me according to your word.'"

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost

When the last Sunday in Advent falls on Christmas Eve, as it does this year, Our Blessed Lady gets a raw deal. Our contemplation of her response to God, as recorded in Luke's Gospel, gets squeezed between picking up the turkey, peeling the potatoes, wrestling with wrapping paper and obstinate selotape, and possibly keeping the peace between different members of the family or even rescuing Christmas decorations from family pets. But however delightful and God-given our secular celebrations may be, we need this quiet moment to focus on Mary as Mother-to-be; before we celebrate the great mystery of the Incarnation.

Christians through the centuries have responded to Mary, Mother of Our Lord, in so many different ways. Very early in the history of the church Mary was accorded a unique place in Christian thinking though not perhaps the great devotion to her which developed later. By the Middle Ages many in the western tradition elaborated traditions of devotion to her and took refuge in her protecting presence and in her prayers – perhaps particularly in the context of popular teaching about the wrath of God, and the prospect of hell and damnation as shown to largely illiterate congregations in graphic detail on the walls of many parish churches. Some have clung to her as Mother when prevailing images of God have emphasised sternness, wrath and masculinity.

Artists and sculptors have portrayed her countless times. The Annunciation and the Nativity must be among the most painted subjects in the Christian tradition. Some have evoked Mary in great grandeur as the Queen of Heaven, despite her humble presence in the gospels. Others contributed to a tradition of depicting a very human Mary in the form of the Pieta, the Mother cradling her dead son in her lap. Most famous is of course Michaelangelo's Pieta in St. Peter's Rome; but the genre is there in more modern form behind our own

Lady Chapel altar. Musicians have honoured Mary in many settings of the *Ave Maria*, echoing the words of the Angel Gabriel we heard in this morning's gospel, and in the settings of the *Stabat Mater*, a 13th century hymn about the grieving Mother standing at the foot of the Cross. After the Reformation many in the Reformed tradition seemed to ignore her totally, and of course obliterated or disposed of her image in churches. It is one of the great tragedies of the Christian church that the figure of Mary, the one so uniquely close to Christ, became at times divisive, as her nature and role have been interpreted and disputed over. For if there is one thing her story of obedience and her closeness to her Son should do it is to bring us in our turn closer to Christ, and in Him to all those who seek to follow Him and carry His name.

Today, as we stand on the verge of Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, Mary is for us the pattern of the Christian response to Jesus as the manifestation of God, the one whose human life was filled with the fullness of God. So how does she respond? What is that pattern and example? Luke's story suggests the steps in her response.

First she listens to what the angel Gabriel has to say.

Second she asks a very pertinent question – how on earth?

Finally she yields herself into God’s hands: “let it be with me according to your word.”

Our response to God made manifest in Christ should follow the same steps.

First we need to listen to what God might be saying to us.

Most of us Christians are not very good at listening to God – just as in our world people in general are not very good at listening. We live in a society where there is abundant noise of people talking, parading their views and achievements, claiming status and so forth. Those rather few people who are quiet and still, who listen to other people, do not have high status, and do not get very far in the world’s terms. This attitude spills over into our lives of faith; and Christians too often bombard God with needs and wants, and fill worship with multitudes of words and songs and hymns – some good, some bad, and some indifferent. But we need to be still and attentive. Mary would have known from the Biblical stories of her ancestors that the appearance of an angel was the coming of a messenger from God: so she listened. Few of us are likely to experience such a dramatic irruption into our lives. But we need to be aware of how God might speak to us; who our

angels might be: and this sort of awareness takes practice and an openness to the pressures of the Holy Spirit.

Obviously scripture may speak to us if we read and listen carefully and prayerfully. God speaks to us in prayer or as a result of prayer, often when we do not expect it. He speaks in stillness most often, or through other people who also seek his will. Our angels are likely to be our neighbours in Christ, our fellow church-goers – even those who minister to us in the name of Christ. It is quite a thought as we look around church this morning!

Once we think we may have heard the calling of God, we need to stop and discern and question. Mary asked a very sensible and pertinent question of Gabriel – how can this be? how can I do this? The scriptures tell us that people often did this: some even seemed to argue with God. Moses complained at length to God and on various grounds when he was asked to return to Egypt to confront Pharaoh and lead out his people. Why should the people accept him as a leader? How could he speak to them because he was slow of speech? Isaiah cried out that he was lost and a sinner when he saw the vision of the Lord in glory. The same can be seen in the early church. Ananias in Damascus, for example, reminded the Lord forcefully that

Saul was a bad lot and dangerous when in a dream he heard the Lord ask him to go and find Saul and lay hands on him so that he might see again. In the story of the conversion of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, Peter demurred with God when in a vision he heard God ask him to kill and eat meat which would have been forbidden to a pious Jew. But the vision persuaded him to go and associate with a Gentile and preach the gospel to his household. Clearly there is a place for a certain tough-mindedness in our discernment of what God is saying to us. Our Mothers and Fathers in the faith like these were no feeble yes-men or women.

And yet - the accounts of the responses of Mary and others like Moses, Isaiah, Ananias and Peter remind us that responding to the call of God is never something we can do in our own strength, or in the light of our own worldly knowledge. The knowledge and strength to respond is gift and grace. Luke tells us that Mary's questioning was answered with the assurance that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and God's power would overshadow her. We like Mary cannot make God's work happen of ourselves. We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves, as the words of the Prayer Book collect for the second Sunday of Lent remind us.

But as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” (2. Cor.12: 9) And to the Philippian Christians he wrote, “I can all things do though him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13) But living by grace is no easy option, no guarantee of a quiet life. Mary’s experience as the Mother of Our Lord makes this very clear. Living by grace, in the hope of grace and strength, takes courage and faith – but of course these too are God’s gifts to us.

Mary’s final step is to say, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” She yields herself into the hands of God. Her willingness and humility to listen and accept the angel’s message leads of course to the great Mystery which we will celebrate in a few hours’ time. The Son of God was made man, born the son of Mary. She is our pattern of response to God’s call and in us too God will become present in human flesh – if we are malleable in his hands.

As Jesus promised his disciples in his urgent compassion for them before he died, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and

make our home with them.” (John 15:23) To so many people this makes no sense at all or even sounds sacrilegious. But it is the very heart of our Christian faith. The Word became flesh and still becomes flesh in those who love him and respond to his call as Mary did. The great mystery of the Incarnation is our mystery, too. In the words of the letter to the Colossians, the great mystery now revealed is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27) The great St. Augustine used to tell those who were about to make their first Communion that they would receive at the altar what they truly were. Quoting Paul writing to the Corinthians , “You are the body of Christ” [1 Cor. 12:27], he preached (Sermon 272) “If you, therefore, are Christ's body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! You are saying "Amen" to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith. When you hear "The body of Christ", you reply "Amen." Be a member of Christ's body, then, so that your "Amen" may ring true!”

So for Blessed Mary, Mother of our Lord, our pattern and example, whose response to God shows us how to follow and be drawn into the life of her Son, God's holy name be praised.