

Advent Voices

Session 3: The gentle voice of Mary

Welcome to the third of our sessions thinking about Advent voices.

After reflecting on the voice of God that brings light and the challenging voice of John the Baptist, this time, by way of a contrast, let's think about the gentle voice of Mary.

Like John the Baptist, Mary is perhaps so familiar to us that we don't always realise how little scripture actually tells us about her. We know she lived in Nazareth and she came from a devout Jewish family. She would have been about 14 years old when she is visited by Gabriel and may well have spent the previous 5 or 6 years living and serving in the Temple, in Jerusalem - one of the Temple virgins - whose job included keeping the place clean and looking after the priests' vestments. Such girls, chosen from good Jewish families, would return to their homes at about 14, to be married, to the man their parents had chosen for them.

So we meet Mary at this stage of her life - back in Nazareth, betrothed to the much older, possibly widowed Joseph, walking through the town. And as she walks someone appears beside her, speaking.

The gospels of Mark and John have no nativity narrative at all and Matthew only tells us that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. So we turn to Luke's gospel to hear Mary's voice.

Read Luke, chapter 1 verses 26 to 38

Read it slowly, trying to see it in your mind's eye. The version below is from the NRSV but read it in any version.)

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. 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 forever, 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.

It's a very familiar account and a passage that is often read with an eye to the continuing story – what happens next – and in our haste to get to the Christmas story, the birth of Jesus, the angels, the shepherds, we may race past this event. But tonight let's stay with Mary and hear her voice.

To say this is an interesting encounter is a massive understatement! (It's probably the most sustained encounter between a heavenly and a human being since Abraham conversed with (the trinitarian!) God – the three men, recorded in Genesis 18.)

But back to Luke ... and I think that in the same way we are surprised how little we are actually told about Mary, we can miss the fact that, according to Luke, Mary only speaks twice in the whole encounter.

Gabriel drops his bombshell – and Mary asks "How can this be? Since I am a virgin"

Gabriel tells her – and Mary replies, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

There is so much we don't know – including how long it took for Mary to give her response! But let's think about the first thing she says.

It's a question – and a very reasonable one! She knows that what Gabriel tells her is beyond the human order of things so she questions. And she receives an answer.

Let's think for a few moments about the times we have questioned God.

Why is this happening God?

What are you doing?

Why are you not doing anything?

How have we come before God with our questions?

How have we framed them?

What has been the state of our heart as we have questioned God?

A few moments to remember the times we have questioned God... and talk to God

about our memories *

We have a clue to the state of Mary's heart as she asked her question, in the second thing she says:

"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

"I am the Lord's servant". Mary's understanding of who she is, is that she exists in a distinct relationship to God.

Not "I am Mary, a girl from Nazareth", not even "I am a good Jewish girl, one of God's chosen people, a child of God" ... but "I am the Lord's servant"

So how do we think of ourselves? ...And how does this affect our conversations with God? **Let's take some time in silence to think about that**

Mary questions God: How can this be true? How can this happen? But this is asked in humble acceptance that God is God – able to do things beyond the confines of human experience. And it is asked in complete submission to the purposes of God.

If Luke's description of this encounter was portrayed on screen, Mary would not have many lines to learn! In writing his gospel, Luke describes Gabriel's invitation and Mary's swift acceptance.

But from what we know of God's generosity in never forcing decisions on us but giving us choice, God's invitation to Mary – indeed God's whole plan for the salvation of the world – was not a *fait accompli*. Early Christian writers describe heaven "holding its breath" waiting to hear Mary's response.

And in just seven words, Mary's voice opens the gates of salvation...

Now let's think about this second time we hear Mary's voice and what she says.

After her visit to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's recognition that God has blessed Mary, Mary's voice peals out in praise and worship.

⁴⁶ *And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Apart from the odd verse dropped into later parts of the gospels. Mary's voice is heard only once more, in the words we have come to know as The Magnificat – her song of praise to God

* If you can, play an online recording of Bach's Magnificat, at least tracks 1-3. And as you listen, hear the voice of Mary, overwhelmed in awe at how wonderful, how amazing God is! How amazing it is that God has chosen to bless the lowliest of God's servants! – and how God's action, not Mary's, will result in wider blessing, for Mary and for God's people.

Mary's acceptance – her “yes” to God's plan, was not limited to her voice. It involved the whole of her being: her heart, her soul, her will, her intellect, her courage, her trust ... and her body. And her words voiced physical, emotional and spiritual acceptance – a voice of faith at its most humble and powerful.

We do not need loud voices or many words to speak to God.
The gentle voice of Mary, heard fleetingly here, as she asks a question of God and responds to God, is as powerful as any in our New Testament.

Mary, in her own eyes, is a lowly servant of God, who has been exalted because of her simple “yes” to God.

And from this starting point, Mary gives voice to the realisation that this is how God works! This is how God acts! This is what God does!

God works through the obedience of God's children who think of themselves as lowly servants of the living God, to bring about God's kingdom.

Through the obedience of God's servants, God is at work in the human world – extending God's mercy from generation to generation, showing God's strength, dealing with those who in any way oppose God, providing for the weak and helpless.

Let it sink in - how amazing it is that God continues to invite his servants – people like us – to be involved in God's great plan of salvation ... and how through us,

God's blessing can flow out to others. Praise God for this! *

Mary's voice is always gentle – but it changes in tone from the encounter with Gabriel to the Magnificat. It grows in confidence – not by thinking how God has chosen and exalted Mary herself – but as she realises the greatness of God.

Let's take a moment to ask God for something of Mary's sense of awe and wonder at God's greatness and God's longing to do great things through us...

And let's end this session reflecting:

How has the voice of Mary prompted our thoughts - about how we come to God with our questions - the state of our heart and our attitude.

Where does our confidence in God come from?

And what questions are we asking of God this Advent? And how are we asking them?

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