

Sermon, Advent 4 Yr B - St James Hall + Online

Luke 1:26-38

20 Dec 2020



Soon after we moved in, we had an expected visit at the Vicarage. The doorbell rang and as usual, the dog beat me to it. A man greeted the dog, and me, and asked how I was getting on in the new house and

proceeded to tell me what nice house it was. Then came the crunch – it could be even nicer if I bought a stainless-steel doorstep cover. I said ‘Thanks but maybe six months later when we’ve settled in’. Down went the façade of niceness, and he stormed off saying, ‘*Well if you’re not getting one now you’re not getting one in six months!*’. In our Bible reading today, a young woman also gets an unexpected visit and a warm greeting. V26 tells us it was the angel Gabriel, sent by God: ‘*Greetings favoured one! The Lord is with you*’(v28), he says to Mary. You can sort of hear the cogs whirring in Mary’s mind – is this the classic, ‘butter me up’ one liner or as V29 more politely puts it ‘*She was much perplexed by his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be*’. Although Mary is young, she seems street-wise and is probably wondering: Hang on, what’s coming next? Some special world-saving secret mission? If this was a scene from ‘Mission Impossible’, this would be the moment when the hero is told ‘*this message will*

self-destruct in 20 seconds!’ But Mary is not Tom Cruise, with a long CV of being a hero, skilled at saving the world. In fact we find Mary’s skillset seems on the face of it, rather lacking, and it’s like the Gospel writers want to convey the reality of this to us in v26 and 27:

- She comes from Nazareth – a rather backwater town.
- She has no wealth or aristocratic status
- A Virgin – suggests she was very young. In the culture of time, lack of health care and sanitary conditions meant that babies born much earlier. So Mary is almost certainly a young teenager.
- No great education, not a single GCSE / A Level to her credit.
- She is engaged, and probably already pre-occupied with preparations for her wedding day and plans for her future life with Joseph.

For Mary, the news Gabriel gives has potential to shatter any existing plans she has. She’s going to have a baby, and Joseph isn’t going to be the dad. The marriage with Joseph is certainly going to be off when he finds out, and so any future martial security and stability is also out of the window. The potential for Social stigma and personal rejection is high. So how does Mary respond? From God’s perspective, He is placing the world’s redemption in the hands of an inexperienced teenager! But appearances can be deceptive. In his book ‘A Promised Land’, Barack Obama reflects on his shortcomings in running for President: ‘*In a contest against American Hero John McCain, we suspected the central issue was likely to be whether a majority of voters could get comfortable with the idea of a young, inexperienced Senator, who hadn’t previously served in the*

military, or held any executive office, filling the role of Commander in Chief. When he became President he said this about his faith: *'This magnificent grace, this expansive grace, this 'Amazing Grace' calls me to reflect. And it calls me to pray. It calls me to ask God for forgiveness for the times that I've not shown grace to others, those times that I've fallen short.'*

Barack, like Mary had a sense of humility about the job they'd been given. For Mary, all her worries and fears must have blended together and invited her to respond to Gabriel, as we did to the doorstep seller, 'Thanks but....no thanks.' Mary's actual response is recorded for us by Luke in v38: *'Here am I, the servant of the Lord, may it be with me according to your word.'* She shows her true colours: she has worry, she has anxiety, she has uncertainty. But in spite of all that, she says Yes and Amen to God. 'Amen' literally means 'may it be so'. That's why Mary is in the Gospels – this would have been shocking to the readers of Luke's Gospel because in the male-centred culture of the time, a woman in a lead role was unheard of. Tom Cruise may have been the action hero on the screen, but in real life it's people like Mary who say *'Let it be with me according to your word.'* And we also see a timeless truth revealed: God works by co-creating with us, inviting us to participate with him, not forcing us. Mary's 'Yes and Amen' allows God to work with her and in her to bring about the world's redemption through Jesus Christ. Jesus came to save the world – but it took a teenage girl to say 'Yes and Amen' for it to happen. And Mary's example inspires us to believe even when the future seems uncertain. Now clearly, we all need to be careful about doorstep sellers and vigilant re online scams. But this Bible reading is saying to

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us that we have to be prepared to be counter-cultural. To be less concerned about our own needs and more occupied with the needs of those around us. There is a place for offering kindness to strangers. To be wise in our dealings but also humble and generous in heart. Many years ago my mother was coming back late one night from ministering at Midnight Mass. She was driving over a mountain pass in South Wales and saw ahead a car burning. There were three people stood nearby and she stopped to ask if they had help on the way but they did not. She offered them a lift home and they said they were only going to the nearest village. So she dropped them off and they thanked her. A week later she was driving by the spot and stopped, there was no trace of wreckage nor any burn marks on the ground. There was nothing in the local papers about a car accident, no locals remembered the incident.



The Annunciation, Titian, c1522

Let's keep watchful, keep prayerful, and never tire of doing good. As Hebrews 13:2 exhorts us: *'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.'* Amen.

So brothers and sisters, let's keep the faith during uncertainty, hold on to hope during anxiety, and be prepared to say 'Yes and Amen' to God.