

Sunday 15th August 2021
The Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Readings

Galatians 4. 4 – 7

⁴When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' ⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Luke 1. 46 – 55

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

Reflection

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Inevitably, the degree to which this particular Festival is celebrated varies. Some give to Mary a significance that puts her almost on a par with Jesus himself. Indeed, the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates her as Theotokos or God-bearer. Many people, particularly of a more Catholic persuasion, pray to Mary and plead for her intervention on their behalf. Many Christians, however, take a different view and – whilst acknowledging Mary's unique role and significance – prefer to hold to the teachings in the Bible that remind us that we can only come to the Father through Jesus himself and that he sits in the glory of the Father and that he alone can intercede on our behalf.

We actually know very little about Mary. Luke tells us that she was a young girl – perhaps in her mid-teens – who was betrothed to a man called Joseph. Joseph – about whom we also know very little – was himself of the house or line of David and so Bethlehem was his home city. However, there is no indication that Mary was also of the house or line of David (Luke 2: 4). And so it was, when Caesar Augustus called for a census to be taken (Luke 2: 1), Mary and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem to be counted. We do know – again from Luke's Gospel – that she had an older relative Elizabeth, who was married to Zechariah, who was a priest in the Temple. Elizabeth had never had any children and was beyond child-bearing age but was suddenly told by the Archangel Gabriel (Luke 1: 5 – 25) that she, in her old age, would be the mother of a boy who was to grow up to become John the Baptist. And so it was that Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins.

Although Mary's background is uncertain, the Gospel's record that Mary was present at several key points in Jesus' ministry: -

- Mary and Joseph welcomed shepherds to the stable on the day that Jesus was born (Luke 2: 16 – 20)
- After circumcising him, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to be presented to the Lord in the Temple – when Simeon announced that Jesus was the Lord's salvation but also prophesied that Mary's heart and soul would be pierced by a sword (Luke 2: 22 – 38)
- Mary and Joseph received the Wise Men / Magi about two years after Jesus' birth (Matthew 2: 1 – 12)
- After the Magi had visited, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with Jesus to escape the murderous actions of Herod (Matthew 2: 13 – 18)
- Mary was present at the wedding at Cana in Galilee and it was she who brought to Jesus' attention the fact that the wine had run out and told the servants to follow whatever instructions he gave them (John 2: 1 - 12)
- Mary took Jesus's brothers and sisters to find him and take him home as he was speaking about casting out demons (Mark 3: 20 - 34)
- Finally, Mary was present at Jesus' crucifixion – and so Jesus committed her into the care of John the disciple (John 19: 17 – 27)

And all of this, of course, began with Mary herself receiving a visit from the Archangel Gabriel (Luke 1: 26 – 38). At that meeting, Gabriel hailed Mary as the chosen one of God and told her that she would give birth to a baby boy and that she was to name him Jesus because he would save his people. In other words, God chose Mary for a unique and vital mission – should she choose to accept it. That mission was to bear in her womb the Son of God when he took on human flesh to dwell amongst us. Not surprisingly, Mary was daunted to be greeted by Archangel Gabriel and told that she had found favour with God and that she would be blessed must have blown her mind. Nevertheless, she accepted God's choice and accepted the mission, the call from God, that she had received. As we know, she did accept the mission and spoke the words that we now refer to as the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46 – 45) that has been a major part in our liturgies for centuries.

Although she is unusual in that she was visited by the Archangel Gabriel, Mary faced the same dilemma that faces all of us who are called by God to do something for him. He calls us at times we can't predict and don't expect. As a result, that call may come as rather a shock and a surprise but may also be a delight. In the Mission Impossible films, the details of the next mission for the team arrive in the form of a recorded message that includes the words "... your mission, should you choose to accept it, is ...". That message from God is a challenge both for us and to us. It may ask us to do something that we had never imagined, it might ask to do something that we have longed to do or be asked to do. Equally, he may ask to go into a situation in which we don't feel comfortable or to do something that we don't feel equipped for. Mary's life shows us that God does not rely on only calling those who obviously have the skills and talents needed for the task. Sometimes, of course, God does ask people to use the skills that they already have in a new way to spread the Gospel and make his salvation known to the ends of the earth. But equally, God also calls into his service those who – at least as far as they are concerned – on the surface do not appear to have the necessary skills or gifts to undertake work for God. Part of the reason for this is that we are not always aware of the skills – that is to say, what we can actually do – that we have to work with on God's behalf. God – as our creator and maker – however knows us much better than we know ourselves and so he is able to call those who can and, far more importantly, are willing to respond to his call. Doing things for God doesn't always require us to be upfront, in public and visible. Sometimes, it is the behind-the-scenes or less prominent roles that are needed and, on some occasions, are actually just what is required and are, for that reason, of greater significance. St Francis of Assisi is reported to have said "Always preach the Gospel and, when necessary, use words". Speaking out publicly is not always required or even appropriate. A quiet word to someone in distress or the giving someone a helping hand – seen or unseen – is just as valuable or, at times, all that is required. It just needs us to be open to the prompting to step out and do what is needed. Essentially, the point is – as Bishop Colin put it some years ago – Jesus does not ask us to go any where that he has not already

been and, more reassuringly, he has been to hell and back for us and has got the scars to prove it. We can, therefore, have nothing to fear from whatever he may ask us to do for him.

Mary had a very special call from God and a very special task to do for him. Accordingly and appropriately, she is held in great esteem within the Christian tradition. The fact that we are not asked by God to undertake a similarly significant task does not mean that we are any less important or that what we can do for God is any less important. On the contrary, Jesus went to the cross for each and every one of us, each and every hair on our head is counted and God loves each and every one of us in a unique way. We each have our part to play in the growth of the Kingdom. As St Paul reminds us, the church is the body of Christ and we are all part of that body. Like the different parts of that body – be it the head, eyes, ears, arms, feet – we are all interdependent and we each have our own unique role to fill. Nobody else can do what we are asked to do for God in a similar way to us. God calls us as individuals and asks us to be the best person and disciple that we can be for him. We are not called to be similar or even the same – although we may share certain characteristics, such as our faith in his Son Jesus Christ. We may have different degrees of faith, but we all have faith and it is a faith in the same God who created, redeemed and sustains us. What matters is that we are each called to follow the same God and Father and the same Jesus Christ. We are each filled with the same Holy Spirit. At our baptism, we all declare our faith and in our daily lives we strive to live it out. That looks different for each and every one of us but that does not diminish our value and significance to God. Our part may not be as significant, or ask as much of us, as Mary's role did but that doesn't mean that God values it any less or that he will use it to achieve his purposes for us and for others.

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