

## TO MARY – LOVE FROM DAD

What sort of Christmas are you expecting? A time of joy? Visits to relatives? Too much pudding? Reflective services at PBC? Or is it that you don't really feel like Christmas at all? Something is happening in your life that takes all the joy away? You could be closer to the original Christmas story than you might think.

Let's read Luke 1:26-38. In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

So here is Mary, maybe 16 years old, looking forward to her wedding. And suddenly she's confronted with an Archangel, announcing an awkward present – a baby from God! Seeing an angel is terrifying enough, but this message! It's no accident that the text mentions that she is "greatly troubled" and concerned at "what kind of greeting it was".

Consider her situation. A young unmarried woman becomes pregnant in a village setting in Ancient Israel. When people were engaged it was like being married. It could only be dissolved with a divorce and anyone having a relationship outside counts as adultery. Mary knew very well what Leviticus 20:10 says "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife--with the wife of his neighbour--both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death." Perhaps she had seen, just outside the village, a girl, victim of an indiscretion, stoned to death. The terrified victim, circled by the leering, jeering crowd of her own neighbours, the dull thud of the stones... Mary could imagine the metallic flavour of blood and the dust herself as her lips bled from the first impact.... And even if she escaped stoning, would she ever be married now? How could she and a child live, disowned by their family, dishonoured? How to start trying to explain a private angelic visit and an immaculate pregnancy? She could feel the sick ache of fear in the pit of her stomach.

The angel gave words of comfort: "The Lord is with you"; "Do not be afraid"; and "you have found favour with God". But nevertheless, surely this was a Gethsemane for her, just as Jesus felt facing crucifixion. Her response was the same as his, freely accepting God's invitation: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Yes, she responded in humility, accepting the situation, but clearly not without fear. She was, in effect, taking a huge risk for God. How would you feel in her position?

Many other Christians have faced the prospect of Christmas with a dull ache in the pit of the stomach. While Mary's challenge is direct from God, for some of us our troubles seem to be the consequence of random misfortune – or the actions of Satan. God's purpose for our lives can be hard to discern.

Consider Nelson Mandela, imprisoned on false charges on Robben Island, an escape proof jail in the bay off Cape Town. South Africa's Alcatraz. He was allowed one letter every six months and could receive one visitor a year for thirty minutes. He sat in his dingy cell for 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 years, looking across the shark-infested water to the mainland where he knew his people were suffering poverty and repression. And equally, he knew that "accidents" like the death in police custody of Steve Biko, could happen to

him any time. As he prayed, could he feel that God had a purpose, or was his life just wasted? Wouldn't you think so?

Think of Paul in the Roman jail, as he wrote the letter to the Philippians. The mighty evangelist, whose ambition was "to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation" sat chained to a Roman soldier day and night. He could feel the iron biting into his wrists and ankles, as water dripped in his dank cell. Had his mission come to this dead end? Wouldn't you think so in his place?

I was in dire straits in 1997, when I got Lyme Disease in Germany where we lived. My arm and shoulder were in agony, my fingers had seized up. I couldn't sleep at all, counting the hours, minutes of each weary night, with the throbbing pain. And my mind started to get affected, with panic attacks, driving I suddenly worried I couldn't find the way home. And finally I believe Satan took a hand, whispering dreadful things I didn't want to hear. A pretty miserable time, don't you think?

Do you feel troubled amid the festivities? Is there a gnawing ache in your stomach? Maybe due to relationship problems, burn out or stress at work, lack of a job, sickness much worse than mine, discouragement in your faith.... Do you feel really out of place in the joyful season?

Maybe Mary's ongoing story can help. The tough times for her were not in vain and God had a way through. It's really important to see that God wasn't disciplining her – she was clearly blameless. But he saw in her an obedient heart that was ready to do his will.

After the angel left, did she bury her head in the sand, cry and wait for her fate? No.

Read Luke 1:39-45. At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

So she went straight away to her trusted relative Elizabeth, seeking human comfort and support from someone in tune with her. Elizabeth, as Gabriel said, had amazed the country around when becoming pregnant way past childbearing age. And God sent his Holy Spirit in power to Elizabeth, confirming what the angel had said, that Mary was expecting the Son of God. There was an explosion of joy for Elizabeth, for her baby John the Baptist in her womb, and for Mary. Through God's grace Mary's fear turned to joy. And Mary sang these unforgettable lines, celebrating God's mercy and faithfulness:

Luke 1:46-55. "My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me--holy is his name.  
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful  
To Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

This song is called the Magnificat, which is “I glorify”, the first words of the song in Latin. Mary sings of four themes, love, gratitude, faith and hope.

She sings of love. In all her turmoil, she worshipped God. She put him first in her life. She saw him as able and willing to save – her, her child and Israel. He is our Saviour too, also in times of trouble.

She sings of gratitude. She now truly realises what a present she had received; she was to be the mother of “the Son of the Most High”. The greatest ruler Israel or the world has ever seen, a man of universal authority. Her story would be remembered forever. Just a peasant girl she did not deserve this special privilege of being the mother of the Messiah. It is said, “Mary was the first person in the world to carry the Gospel.” We too must sing of gratitude – as Christians we are honoured as adopted sons and daughters of God, even when it doesn’t always feel like it.

She sings of faith. Joyfully she proclaims God’s mercy to the whole world. Mary did not know the details of how her son would save the world, she simply believed God’s Word that said He would. So she sang that with Jesus’ advent, the proud, the tyrants, the rich, and Satan himself would not have free reign in the world – God is on the side of the humble, the victims, those in dire straits. This comes through powerfully in the Message “He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.” God’s new order will bring hope for those, including us, who feel downtrodden, physically or spiritually. This is a revolutionary message that we shouldn’t just spiritualise – it means God is right behind “making poverty history”. We are sometimes too used to passages like this to see how amazing they are!

Mary sings of hope. Mary recalls that God keeps his promises. Right back to Abraham, who, childless, had been promised descendants “as numerous as the sand on the seashore”. God’s promise is now fulfilled in Jesus’ coming birth. It means God’s mercy is also available for succeeding generations including ourselves, who follow Jesus. God’s promises are sure even when our life is in turmoil.

Besides these themes, her song strongly foreshadows Jesus’ ministry 30 years later. When Jesus comes to the synagogue, proclaiming the ‘kingdom’ as Wayne discussed in previous weeks, he is also stressing God’s mercy and the fulfilment of promises made so long ago through Isaiah: Remember Luke 4:18-19: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” It came about only Mary being willing to do God’s will, bearing Jesus.

And as we know from Matthew, Mary’s situation with Joseph was resolved when she returned to Nazareth 3 months later, with a growing bump. God gave Joseph a dream to explain the situation, and he accepted her as his wife. (Phew)

What has Mary’s story to do with us, especially those of us in tough situations today? Let’s look at what happened in the dire situations we mentioned.

Nelson Mandela kept his faith and did not despair. He always believed that God would resolve the injustice of apartheid South Africa. And he was released from prison after 27 years, and not only that but he became President of a South Africa where all have equal rights! God showed he had a purpose through Mandela’s long, dreary imprisonment. Through “freedom for this prisoner”, God proclaimed “release for the oppressed”. The words of Isaiah applied to the physical realm.

Paul found that God had a purpose in keeping him in prison! Philippians 1:12-14: “what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in

the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.” So the Gospel spread, even to the core of the Roman Empire, and the church was inspired – inviting people to the Roman Alpha course. As Paul says later, despite his circumstances, he rejoiced – just like Mary! Through him, God proclaimed “good news for the poor”. The words of Isaiah applied to the spiritual realm.

In my case, it was my illness that led me, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to insist on buying a Bible that ultimately led me to Christian faith. Only the hours of sleeplessness, and attacks by Satan, led me to realise that Jesus was just waiting there for me to turn to him and ask him into my life. In my case, spiritually, God gave “recovery of sight to the blind”.

As you can see, God resolved these dire situations, mercifully, for his purposes, in the ways prophesied by Isaiah and Mary, and brought to fruition in Jesus’ ministry:

If you feel out of tune with Christmas festivities, I believe Mary’s story can give you hope. In her trouble, she held on to God’s promises and worshipped God despite hard times. She didn’t hide away but sought human support too. She trusted in God. She proclaims in the Magnificat that God is merciful and he hears those who suffer. That God works through tough situations, and fulfils his purpose through them. Jesus’s words in the synagogue that reaffirmed these promises in the Magnificat are still valid for us today. By his Holy Spirit, through his church, he is still bringing good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed.

Are God’s purposes in your life unclear to you today? I know how hectic the Christmas time is but I would encourage you to create space for God at this time. You might want to re-read the Magnificat and meditate on Mary’s story and the themes of her song – love, gratitude, faith and hope. Or if everything is fine with you, consider whether you are called as an Elizabeth to draw alongside someone who is troubled.

After the worship, people will be available for those of us who want to be prayed for. Especially, I believe there are people here who are suffering alone – no one knows your pain. God may be calling you to let go today. Like Mary who went to see her cousin, you may wish to join someone you trust for prayer and ministry. Again like Mary, you can receive Dad’s love at Christmas. Kisses, tears, gifts from the Father’s heart...the gift of Jesus.