

Reflection for 8th September when the church celebrates the birth of St. Mary, the Virgin

As we come out of lockdown many are finding it actually harder to come out than it was at the beginning. We spent so long thinking out would mean back to as it was before only to find that is far from the truth. It has been a time of upheaval for many of us. So now seemed a good time to consider Mary and what we actually know about her, stripped of art and imagination and numerous myths and legends.

Our knowledge begins in the sixth month of the year at a time when Herod was king in Judea, a cruel puppet king, under Roman occupation. Mary lived in a small town in the north of Israel. She was a young girl, probably in her mid to late teens, and was engaged to the local carpenter, Joseph. She had a vision of the angel Gabriel coming to her and saying "Greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you." Mary was awed, troubled by his words. The angel continued "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be pregnant and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Joshua. (Jesus is the Greek spelling of the Hebrew name Joshua.) 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 for ever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be" Mary asked the angel "seeing that 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 us in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary replied. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Mary must have been stunned, overwhelmed by that experience. She decided to visit Elizabeth. No one else she knew could have helped her come to terms with what was happening, and it was likely that she was already with Elizabeth when she realized for certain that she was indeed pregnant. She stayed with Elizabeth till after the birth of John the Baptist.

At that time pregnancy before marriage was a cause of public shame. She had to go home and tell Joseph. He was appalled; but he cared enough for Mary that he did not want to make a public exhibition of her but just quietly cancel their engagement. (Matthew 1, 19-25) But then the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to call him Joshua (Jesus) because he will save his people from their sins." When he woke up Joseph took Mary home as his wife. By that time she would have been at least four months pregnant. Another four months and she faced yet more upheaval. The Roman occupiers of Judea had decided to take a census of the population. But it was not to be a first century version of our simple form filling. They were insisting that every man must return to, in effect, the county town of his birth. Joseph was descended from David so that meant he could not be counted at home in

Nazareth but would have to travel to Bethlehem. I don't believe for one minute that any of you who have visited the Holy Land recently made that journey by donkey and so close to giving birth. And when they got there the town was packed with others of David's descendants who had come in from other places. Houses were full to bursting. Joseph was getting desperate when at last an inn keeper said "well I'm sorry but the only space I have left to offer you is the stable room". So there they finally found a modicum of rest after the gruelling journey, and there in the stable room Mary gave birth.

But even then the night was not over. Around midnight some shepherds arrived at the inn saying they had had a vision of angels while watching over their sheep and that an angel had said to them, the humblest and most despised workers in Judea, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messaiah (Christ). This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly they had seen a great choir of angels praising God and saying "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

(Luke Chap 1, v.26-40, Chap 2, v. 1-14)

Reading between the lines, it seems that once the census had been taken and the crowds left for their homes Joseph found a house for his young family where they could stay at least until after the days of Mary's purification according to the law. Matthew tells us that during that time some magi came from further east (probably modern Iran) and went first to King Herod to ask where they could find the baby born to be king of the Jews because they had seen a special star back home and had come west to worship him. Herod was not happy and sent for Jewish scholars to ask them where the Messaiah would be born. They told him Bethlehem. The magi went to Bethlehem to look for the child. We are not told how many magi were in the party but we are told of the three gifts they carried with them. So one day these important strangers arrived at the house where the holy family was staying and presented their gifts. As a well-loved carol puts it

"Solemn gifts of mystic meaning
Incense doth a God disclose;
Gold the King of Kings proclaimeth;
Myrrh a future tomb foreshows"

But Herod could brook no rivals in his kingdom. He planned to have every little boy two years old or younger put to death. God warned Joseph in a dream and he packed up quickly and took Mary and the baby away in the middle of the night and fled into Egypt. The infant Christ was to spend his earliest years as a refugee. (Matthew Chap. 2 v 13-15)

Some of you may want to pause here and read the rest of this reflection another day.

Once Herod died Joseph and the family returned to Judea, but wary of Herod's equally cruel son, Herod Antipas, Joseph decided to return to Nazareth and set up his carpenter's shop again there. We know no more about Mary until Jesus was 12 years old and ready to go

with them to Jerusalem for the Passover. All went well till they started the journey back home. Thinking the 12 year old Jesus was somewhere in the party with others of his own age they did not worry until they stopped for the night and found he was not with them. In consternation Joseph and Mary rushed back to Jerusalem and searched the city for him. Eventually they found him in the temple listening to the teachers of the law and asking them questions. And Mary told him off "Son", she said, "why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." But Jesus asked them "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he meant by this. So Jesus went home with them and was obedient to them. (Luke 2, v. 41-end)

There are very few references to Mary after this until the time of the crucifixion. One told by John speaks of a wedding at Cana. The family was there and Jesus had taken his disciples along too. Mary appears to have been helping with the entertainment and when she saw the wine was running out she went and found Jesus and told him what was happening. Jesus' reply is hard to translate into English that does not sound much harsher than it does in Greek. In effect he was saying "Don't worry, mother. My time is not quite yet but I do have it in mind." She said no more, but found the servants who served the wine. They were standing neat the water pots that held water for the ceremonial washing of the feet of arriving guests. Mary said to them "Whatever Jesus tells you to do, do it." They must have been dumbfounded when he told them to fill those water pots with water and when they had done so said "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." Again the important people, humanly speaking, had no idea where this new excellent wine had come from. Only the lowliest servants who had drawn the water knew. (John 2, v.1-11)

We know hardly anything more about Mary until we find her in Jerusalem standing at the foot of the cross, and after the resurrection meeting with the disciples and others in the upper room.

"For Mary, Mother of our Lord,
God's holy name be praised,
Who first the son of God adored,
As on her child she gazed.

Brave, holy virgin, she believed,
Though hard the task assigned,
And by the holy Ghost conceived,
The Saviour of mankind.

Dear Mary, from your lowliness
And home in Galilee
There came a joy and holiness
To every family.

Hail, Mary, you are full of grace,
Above all women blest;
And blest your Son, whom your embrace
In birth and death confessed."

J.R. Peacey (1896-1971)