

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

20th December 2020 – Fourth Sunday in Advent

LUKE 1:26-38

HUMBLE SERVICE

One of the most recognisable people from over the last 2,000 years, especially in the Christian world, would have to be ... Mary. It's interesting, isn't it, that even though we don't know what she looked like exactly, and we see many different kinds of pictures of her, she is still instantly recognizable. She is probably the most talked about, written about, sung about, drawn and sculptured, woman in history, and certainly the most well-known. And this is because she plays one of the most loved and best-known roles in the Christian faith. And, as we lead up to the Christmas story in just a few days' time, she gets increased attention again.

But really, for all this, what do we actually know about her? We know that she was from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, that she was engaged to a man named Joseph who was from the line of King David, and that she had been chosen by God to fulfil His plan of salvation by giving birth to His Son. But the rest is mere conjecture. From the customs of the time we make an educated guess that she was probably around 14 years old. The man she was betrothed to was probably at least thirty, and most likely a relative of her father, like some sort of cousin. Although she seems like a nice, quiet, submissive young lady, we again assume that; we aren't told that that's why she was picked. We're not told anything about her parents or her family, so that can't be important for this story. And there seems to be no special thing she has done to earn the great honour given to her. Instead, the woman God chose to be the mother of His Son was an ordinary teenage girl, from a small unimportant village, in a small and unimportant province, which was just a quiet and insignificant backwater of the great Roman Empire.

Think about the other people who feature so prominently in the story of God and His people: Moses, Gideon, Samson, Ruth, Esther. Kings Saul, David and Solomon. The prophets like Samuel, Nathan, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Daniel. And on to characters in the New Testament like the disciples,

Mary Magdalene. All very different people whose stories are spread out over thousands of years. The one thing they all have in common is that they were all very human people, with faults as well as strengths, but that God used them in His work.

Some of these people had special connections or gifts which explains why God selected them, but about Mary we know nothing. Her story begins quite simply by telling us that about a month after an angel had visited Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, the angel Gabriel came to visit Mary. I love the way that when angels come to see people the stories are often dripping with irony. When an angel came to visit Gideon and found him hiding from his enemies he was greeted with the words, 'you are a mighty warrior'! Now, the first words Gabriel says to Mary are, 'You are truly blessed!' !! Interesting greeting. Mary is a young girl betrothed to a man who is probably related to her, and this angel comes and says she is about to have a baby and her betrothed is quite obviously not the father. When word of this got out Mary could expect that at the very least she and her family would be shunned by their whole village and sent away. At worst, and quite probably, she would be stoned to death for adultery. At the first hearing there really would haven't seemed to be much of a blessing in what the angel was telling her.

Don't you think that often it's people's first reactions to events and situations which tell us so much about them and their character? The angel goes on to tell Mary that she will have a child, His name will be Jesus, and He will be a King like his ancestor David, but His kingdom will last forever. Mary's only question is from a physical point of view; how can all this happen when she has never been with a man. And then, when the angel has given her the answer that this will happen because the Holy Spirit will give her a child and nothing is impossible with God, Mary's response is, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said." Compare that with other responses. Moses and Gideon both questioned God and demanded signs that what He said was true. Jonah tried to run away rather than follow his calling; a bit fishy that story. The disciples, led by Peter, in spite of all they saw and heard only really got what it meant to follow Jesus after the Holy Spirit came to them at Pentecost.

Mary, with just the simple explanation she is given, and in the face of uncertainty about the future and even possible death, she simply says, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said." Although we know nothing about her background, and up until this point we haven't really known anything about her character, in reading this simple response we can say, 'ah, so that's why God chose her.' It's her attitude of humble service, an attitude which comes out in her willingness to be a part of God's plan no matter what she faces, it is in this that we see the reason God has chosen this young woman above all others to be the mother of His Son. Humble servants, people willing to follow God, put Him first, trust Him, these are the people God can and does use in His work.

'Nothing is impossible with God'. 'I am the Lord's servant'. I wonder how much that attitude of service comes through in our lives. Is this what we see around us? Certainly, we do see a lot of selfless service, especially after the year we have been having, but we also see a lot of selfishness as many people make sure they are looked after first, even if that is at the cost of others.

But what are we told here, and what do stories like Mary's teach us about the call God gives to us? Each one of us are called to be servants of God; each one of us called to be in His service. How do we go with that? Do we always have that attitude of Mary, 'I am the Lord's servant', or do we look for the stumbling blocks instead. Do we look for the reasons why we can't serve, instead of trusting God that we can. Again, that's not new. Moses said, 'Lord, who am I to go to Pharaoh and tell Him to let your people go?' Gideon said, 'I and the youngest in my family, which is the least important in the village, which is the smallest in Israel, how can I lead the army?' Samson, Saul, David and others tried to do things their own way. Mary says, 'I am the Lord's servant'.

Do we also look for reasons why things can't be done? 'Lord, I don't think those people will listen to me.' 'But God, if I don't join in with what they are doing I will stand out from the crowd.' 'Everyone else is doing it, why should I miss out?' 'Everyone else is doing it, what difference would it make if I don't?' 'God, maybe you are calling us to go in that direction, but I think that is a bit outdated these days. This will be a better direction.' Is following the call always

easy? It's not, is it? Sometimes it's not even overly clear. Can we always trust God when we follow Him? Yes, we can. The words which it seems convinced Mary were when Gabriel said, 'Nothing is impossible with God'. The God who created the world just with His Words, the God who enabled a virgin to conceive. The Lord who entered human history as a child. The One who enabled a human to rise from the tomb and ascend into heaven, and who through the power of the Holy Spirit has enabled His Church to spread around the world over the last 2,000 years even in the face of hardship and persecution. With this God, as the angel said, nothing is impossible. Many of the things we face in life probably pale into insignificance compared to what Mary was facing, but still she trusted God. In her attitude of humble service, we see that we also can trust and follow God in all things.

Humble service. It's what Mary showed, and it's what all those other people in the Bible ended up showing also; it's just that some ended up taking longer to get there than others, as, often, do we. But for that, we have God's forgiveness and God's patience with us. Thank God that He does continue to work in our world and in our lives every day. Just as the Holy Spirit came to give Mary courage and that attitude of humble service, may we also let the Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we can respond in the same faithful way to our calling also. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

Humble Service

Mary showed her faith, and why she was chosen by God for her role, in the humble way she responded to God's call to her

- What are the ways God is calling you in your life?
- Do you always find it easy to respond to God's call? What is in your way?
- Are there things/people/ attitudes preventing you from freely following God? Ask for His help to address these?

Many Callings

We each have many callings/vocations in our lives.

- What are the callings you have, eg, husband/wife, parent, child, employee, student, colleague, friend?
- In these callings, what situations has God placed you in so that you can serve others, both in helping them and in being a witness to your faith?
- Ask for God's help to be a faithful witness to Him in the way you live out your life each day.