

# The Servant of the Lord

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> December 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: **Luke 1:26-38**

## Introduction

Have you ever met a famous person? Or maybe someone you know well is also a celebrity of some sort. Is the person *you* know the same as the image of them that is portrayed in the media? Are they as confident and self-assured on the inside as they may appear on the outside?

Popular TV programmes like "I'm a Celebrity" and "Strictly Come Dancing" give us an opportunity to see what happens to people who are confident in their own sphere when they are put into a new and unfamiliar environment. Put under pressure, how will they react? What are they really made of?

## The many faces of Mary

Our subject today is one of the most famous people of all time: Mary, the mother of Jesus. Over the past two thousand years Mary's status and role has developed in line with popular religious piety and as a consequence of theological exploration. She has acquired titles like "Mother of God", "Mother of the Church", "Star of the Sea" and "Queen of heaven", and doctrines about her having been conceived without original sin and having been taken up to heaven bodily at the end of her life have been concocted to fit this exalted status. There isn't time to talk about these today. What I'm more interested in is the Mary portrayed in the Bible, who is a *very ordinary woman with an extraordinary calling*.

We first come across her in the two opening chapters of Luke and Matthew. After the birth of Jesus, Luke tells the story of Mary and Joseph meeting Simeon and Anna in the temple, and Simeon tells Mary that "a sword will pierce your own heart"<sup>1</sup>. We hear no more until Jesus is 12, when he gets lost in Jerusalem and is eventually found by his worried parents talking with the Jewish teachers in the Temple<sup>2</sup>. What we do know from Mark and Matthew is that Mary and Joseph had four other sons, James, Joseph, Simon and Judas, and at least 2 daughters<sup>3</sup>. Many years later, James took over as head of the church in Jerusalem. Judas may be the writer of the letter of Jude in the New Testament. We know that Mary's husband Joseph was a carpenter, and that Jesus also took up that trade. Once Jesus has started his ministry, his mother and brothers are mentioned as looking for him<sup>4</sup>, and later Mary is mentioned in John's gospel as being present at the Cross, where Jesus entrusts her to the care of his beloved disciple, probably John<sup>5</sup>. Then in the Acts of the Apostles we see Mary

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:34-35

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:41-51

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 13:55-56

<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:31

<sup>5</sup> John 19:25-27

gathered with the disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Church<sup>6</sup>. A later church tradition says that she moved to Ephesus with the apostle John, and there is a church there today named after her. But the evidence for this is shaky.

### **A ordinary woman**

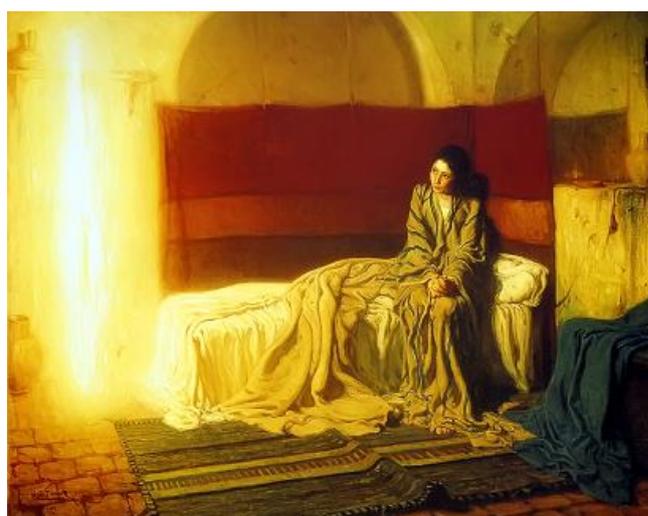
So what do we know about the ordinary young woman that we read about in the Gospel of Luke? Janet Rogers spoke of her as a teenager, and suggested that she could have been as young as 12 when the angel visited her. I have to say I feel distinctly uncomfortable at the thought of any girl getting married so young. Of course, there is no information in the Bible or elsewhere about how old Mary was, but it is reasonable to assume that the customs of working-class Jews in Jesus' day were similar to those of traditional societies around the world, especially in the Middle East. Both girls and boys were expected to marry and have children. Boys were to learn a trade so that they could be the bread-winner for their family, and girls learned the art of home-making from their mothers, aunts and grandmothers. There was no secondary education, let alone university, for most young people, which in our society delays what we consider adulthood. So it is very likely that Mary was still a teenager, and so, in modern terms, a child, although in her society she would have been considered a young adult.

We know that Mary and Joseph were betrothed to be married. A betrothal was a formal ceremony with a legally binding status, and took place about a year before the actual wedding.

So here we are, some time after the betrothal, with the story of Mary being visited by the Archangel Gabriel. I'd like to show you two paintings of this event, made about 450 years apart. Which, I wonder, speaks to you most about Mary and her calling?



The Annunciation by Fra Angelico (version held in the Prado museum in Spain) (c.1435)



The Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1898)

<sup>6</sup> Acts 1:14

I expect that if we're trying to imagine what Mary really was like, the more modern painting may speak to us more. It was painted in 1898 by Henry Ossawa Tanner, an African American painter who spent most of his life in Paris. You might think of his style as more realistic, whereas the other painting by Fra Angelico, painted about 1435, is very symbolic. Tanner chooses to portray the Archangel Gabriel as a beam of bright light – he is, after all, a heavenly being, incapable of being properly described by a human. In contrast, Mary looks like a very ordinary, unassuming young woman. Her eyes are focussed on the angel, and her mouth is closed, as if she is concentrating on what he is saying to her. She is overawed, but attentive and thoughtful.



Fra Angelico's painting shows Mary in a posture of humility and respect – as a Basque carol puts it, "Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head". But notice that the Angel is also bowing before *her*, showing the respect that is due to the soon-to-be Mother of God. And while this exchange of mutual respect is going on, a shaft of light is beamed toward's Mary's heart from the radiance of God in the top left-hand corner of the painting, and if you look carefully you can see a small dove in the beam of light, just in front of the angel's head. As Mary opens her heart to God's will, so the Holy Spirit comes upon her, in fulfilment of Gabriel's words, to enact the miracle of her virgin conception. You can also see on Mary's knee a small book, which a Bible, showing that Mary is already a pious woman. In other traditional symbolic paintings of the Annunciation, you will see Mary kneeling at a prayer desk, again with a book open. There are two examples in our church: the wall painting to the right of the high altar, and the stained glass window in the North wall.



There is a later, more well-known painting of this scene by the same artist, Fra Angelico, in the San Marco Convent in Florence, which does not have the ray of light or the dove. Nor does it have the scene on the left of the picture, which shows in the background Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden. The juxtaposition of these two scenes explains theologically what is happening in the Annunciation. Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, bringing condemnation on the human race for its sin; by contrast, Mary's obedience to the word of God will make possible the salvation of the world. Mary's obedience is the channel for God's grace to enter the world, symbolised by the beam of light that is directed towards her heart. In his letter to the Romans Paul described Jesus as the new Adam, who brought life instead of death; in the same way, second-century Christian writers<sup>7</sup> contrasted Eve's disobedience with Mary's obedience, leading to her being called "the new Eve".

Grace comes through Mary, but for this to happen Mary herself is filled with the grace of God, as can be seen in the greeting of Gabriel when he says "Greetings,

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<sup>7</sup> Justin Martyr and Irenaeus

favoured one!” The word translated “favoured one” comes from the Greek word *charis*, meaning grace. It can also be translated, “full of grace”, as in the Catholic prayer “Hail Mary, full of grace”. The word translated “Greetings” or “Hail” is also worthy of comment. It is the common word for saying “Hello” in Ancient Greek. But it literally means, “Rejoice!” Gabriel’s message is indeed one of joy.

### **A Servant heart**

We’ve seen that Mary is an ordinary woman with an extraordinary calling. But what has her story got to do with our lives? None of us, whatever our calling, can match the role which God chose for this young woman.

But we can learn from her example. Mary, as she goes about her business on that day, has no inkling of what is about to happen. The appearance of the angel frightens her, and it needs his words of reassurance to help her to be calm. She can’t immediately make sense of what Gabriel is asking of her – how can she become pregnant when the wedding is still many months away? And even when the angel explains about the Holy Spirit coming upon her, I doubt that Mary fully takes that in. Perhaps hearing about Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy enables her to see that God is at work and he will take care of everything.

Mary’s willingness to trust God is, I am sure part of the reason why God has chosen her. But there’s another reason which we can hear in her response: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” The word that Mary uses, translated “servant”, is important. There were two kinds of servant in the first-century Roman Empire: hired servants, who chose to work for their masters in return for wages, and slaves, who made up about half the population of the Empire, and who were owned by their masters and had to do whatever they wanted. The word Mary uses is *doula*, a female slave. Mary’s commitment to God is total – she offers herself to do whatever he wants. She is saying, “Lord, I am yours – my will, my body, my life. Use me as you will in your gracious purposes for the world”.

God still has a plan to bring salvation to the world, the salvation made possible through the incarnation, death and resurrection of his Son. Today he is still looking for those who are willing, like Mary, to be channels of his grace. We may not know how God might want to use us. And God does not expect us to understand how we could be used. But the key question is, are we willing? Are we available?

As I close, I’m going to leave a few moments of silence for us to reflect on how available our life is for God. Are you too busy running your life your way to hear God’s promptings? Would you do anything for God? If God asked you to speak to someone, to comfort someone, to give something up or to give something away, would you hear him? And would you obey him?

*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*