

*Mary's journey*

It's one of the most famous journeys in history, one that is inscribed on Christmas cards every year and enacted in Nativity plays and pageants: the journey made by Mary and her fiancé Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order for them to be enrolled in a census. That was a journey that led them to a stable and a manger, and it's one that we will encounter in a couple of days' time, on Christmas Eve, when late at night we will place ourselves in that stable, around that manger, with shepherds for company. This morning, however, I want us to consider another journey of Mary's, one that we discern in today's reading from Luke's Gospel. It's a journey that only took a few minutes, one that is described in just twelve verses, and yet in some ways it might be called the journey of Mary's life. And it's a journey that we pick up at three places, as we'll see.

So let's turn back to our reading from Luke and we read there that in the sixth month of the pregnancy of Mary's relative Elizabeth the angel Gabriel was sent to town in Galilee to a virgin engaged to a man called Joseph. The virgin's name was Mary and the angel said to her, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' And then come these words that describe Mary, 'But she was perplexed by his words and wondered what sort of greeting this might be.' So – Mary was perplexed. Other versions of the Bible say 'troubled'. In other words Mary is disturbed, confused – and note that she hasn't yet been told the extraordinary thing that is going to happen to her. Gabriel hasn't mentioned any baby yet. No word of a strange conception by the Holy Spirit, no word of the birth of one who will reign over the house of Jacob and be called Son of God. All that has yet to come. For now, just a greeting, just a description of Mary as 'favoured one' who the Lord is with. But Mary is perplexed and we can understand why. After all, who is this strange messenger who has just intruded on her and is about to turn her life inside out? And why is she being described as 'favoured' and blessed by God? So it is that the whole story of Jesus' birth, the whole adventure, begins with Mary in this troubled state of bewilderment and confusion. And I imagine that was a familiar condition for Mary as Jesus grew up and he and she had to come to terms with his unique vocation. I imagine she got well used to being perplexed.

Remember that trip up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival when Jesus was twelve and they lost him because he stayed behind in the temple, and we imagine their panic and their terror and when eventually they found him there he was so cool and poised, gently chiding them and speaking of having to be about his Father's business. I imagine Mary was perplexed then at this child who seemed more concerned with his divine parent than his human ones. And there was that time in Cana of Galilee when the wine ran out and Mary looked to him to help and he chided her more forcefully that time, seeming to rebuke her for seeking his help. I imagine she was perplexed then. Or there was that time when Mary and his brothers came and we are told that they tried to restrain him because people were saying he was mad – a mother so provoked by her son that she tried to restrain him! And there was the time when Jesus effectively disowned his family by saying that his true family were those who did the will of God. If I'd been Mary I would have been troubled and confused by that – hurt even. You see, what is clear is that Jesus was not easy to live with, especially for those closest to him. He didn't always accommodate himself to them and meet their expectations and being his family meant no easy ride.

So that's the first description of Mary – perplexed – and that is the start of her journey. But then as we read on we find the next step. Gabriel tells her that she will give birth to his king who will be called Son of the Most High and who will reign over Israel and whose kingdom will never end. And in verse 34, we have Mary's reply, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' In other words she questions Gabriel and this is interesting. If we go back to the previous chapter of Luke we find Gabriel appearing to an old man called Zechariah, husband of Elizabeth and way past the age of child-bearing, and he has been told that he will be the father of a child. And what is his response? His response is, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.' In other words he questions. And maybe Gabriel got out of bed on the wrong side that morning or he's having a bad day but he doesn't like being questioned. 'I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God and I have been sent to speak to you...' he says and strikes Zechariah dumb, and dumb he remains until the birth of his son John. Yet what Mary says is not so very different. 'How can this be? I am a virgin?' But she suffers no punishment. She is allowed to question. She is allowed to raise objections.

So Mary moves from puzzlement and perplexity to questioning and then, right at the end of this encounter, in verse 37, comes acceptance: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word.' Here is Mary's submission to the will of God. Here is her embracing of her calling, her readiness to obey. And Mary is often held up as a role model, an icon of submission and of acceptance and obedience, the one who meekly assented and embraced the will of God. But I wonder if it's as simple as that. Her journey was maybe more complex than that, moving from bewilderment to questioning – and only then, submission and acceptance. And I want to hold onto this because I believe that the end and goal of our faith journey is submission to God, and that submission, paradoxically, is the key to our liberation and fulfilment. But full submission to God is a destination that is not reached easily and the way is not straight-forward.

Take the first step, Mary's confusion and perplexity. We live in a world that craves certainty. That is one reason why people struggle with the whole notion of faith. We live in a world dominated by the scientific world view which (allegedly) is founded on certainty, on what can be tested and proved – though in fact it's not nearly as simple as that. And I suspect that is why fundamentalism is such a feature of a scientific age because fundamentalism deals in certainties. Everything is clear-cut and if we are confused and struggling then we must hide it and keep it ourselves or assert our faith even more stridently to hide our confusion. But faith does not give us the certainty that science craves. We believe the Jesus Christ is the truth, the ultimate truth of the universe, the word spoken to us from the heart of God, but that does not make him a simple, straight-forward answer to life's mysteries. By its very nature faith leaves us perplexed, but can the things of God be otherwise? Should we be surprised that we find God baffling?

And of course along with perplexity goes Mary's next step, questioning 'How can this be?', and that is a question that always lies close to the heart of faith. How can this be? How can this be that the Word becomes flesh? How can this be that the eternal God takes on skin and bone and is found nailed to a gibbet by the city's garbage dump? How can this be that we're told that Joseph was not involved in Jesus' birth for he was conceived by the Holy Spirit? How can this be for us who live in a scientific age? How can this be that a grave outside Jerusalem has been gloriously disowned by its occupant? But more than that, how can this be that a God of love presides over such a world as this?

How can this be that there is such suffering? How can this be that little children die of cancer? How can this be? – this is the question that haunts the life of faith and we are meant to ask it.

But then of course, after all the bewilderment, and the persistent questioning there comes the final part of Mary's encounter: 'let it be with me according to your word.' Here a troubled faith finally comes home in submission to God and a restless heart finds rest at last. And just as this is the final step in her encounter with Gabriel so, I dare say, is it the final step in her life. And it may be that Mary could not reach this point of acceptance without the perplexity and without the questioning, but equally without this acceptance her faith cannot be complete.

One of my favourite books of the past year is one called 'The Testimony of Mary' by the Irish writer Colm Tóibín and much acclaimed. In it Tóibín imagines Mary at the end of her days, living in Ephesus and reflecting on the extraordinary events of her life. This is a weary, hardened Mary who looks back with grief and some bitterness on what has befallen her, a feisty Mary who give short-shrift to those who come to her and want her to make of her son's life any kind of triumph or victory. Towards the end of the book there is a harrowing but moving passage where she speaks these words to some who have come to her and spoken of Christ's death as redemption: 'I was there', I said. 'I fled before it was over but if you want witnesses then I am one and I can tell you now, when you say that he redeemed the world, I will say that it was not worth it. It was not worth it.' What I find compelling about that is that it seems to me to represent what Mary would have been like if she had never reached the stage of submission, if she had never got that place when from deep in her heart she could say, 'let it be with me according to your word.' Left only with perplexity and questioning she could have been a reluctant figure, her heart pierced by her calling to be the mother of Jesus.

Bewilderment, questioning, submission. These are the moments in Mary's encounter with Gabriel – but beyond that we might see them as steps or the journey of her life with Jesus. Living with Jesus was never easy for her and nor is it for us. But the goal of the Christian life is the trusting acceptance of Mary's 'let it be with me according to your word.' I pray that however troubled and turbulent your journey with Jesus may be, you may be able to echo that submission in your heart. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
eternal creator become creature,  
eternal word become flesh,  
eternal Spirit birthing all creation,  
we praise and bless your holy name.  
We worship you who  
said 'yes' to creating all things in heaven and on earth,  
and we worship you who in Jesus Christ  
has said 'yes' to coming into the world you love,  
laying aside your glory;

and we praise you for Mary, the mother of God,  
who said 'yes' to becoming the mother of Jesus  
and giving birth to our Lord and Saviour,  
despite the risk and the shame.

We praise you for your – and for Mary's – faithfulness.

O God forgive us for times when we say 'yes'  
to things we should say 'no' to...

and 'no' to things we should say 'yes' to.

Forgive us for when we compromise  
and take the easy way out, resisting your call  
because of its demands.

Forgive us we pray and make us like Mary  
who did what was not easy but who submitted to your will.

Assure us we pray for your forgiveness and grace

And give us Mary's willingness to obey and to serve.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, born of Mary  
and our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

O loving God,  
God of Mary, God of Jesus,  
God of the certain and God of the confused,  
we pray today for all people of faith,  
all seekers after God,  
that we may find common cause in striving after the common good,  
and that we may engage with one another with courtesy and respect  
while holding firm to our own deep convictions.

We pray that the presence of religion and faith may enhance and not diminish the life of the world.

And we pray especially for Christians, especially those who suffer persecution and martyrdom, that you will give them great strength and courage.

We pray for our fellow Christians in other denominations, for our nearby Lutherans, Roman Catholics and Mennonites, praying that you would bless our fellow family in Christ.

And on this Sunday when we read of Mary, a woman of faith, we pray especially for Libby Lane, nominated to be the first woman bishop in the Church of England.

Endow her and all church leaders with your Spirit who inspires vision and gives wisdom and understanding.

And God, bless we pray our Christmas services in the coming days,

As we celebrate with some who may not come near church at any other time.

May something of the wonder and mystery of your love reach out to them and draw them closer to you.

We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.