

Address – 19/12/21

'Mary'

Luke 1:39-45

The angel said to Mary, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you.' And Elizabeth said to her, 'Blest are you among women and blest is the child you will bear.'

The annual Christmas nativity service is of course one for the children but, like every other service, it is also one for all of us to deepen our understanding and our faith, and so I want to take a few moments to take you deeper than the familiar story that has once again been enacted for us this morning.

I would like to take a look with you today at the person of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Now in reformed churches we often shy away from Mary for fear of getting sucked towards the other end of the spectrum where our Roman Catholic friends exalt her to a position that is entirely unwarranted by the biblical revelation and in some cases verges on the blasphemous. Let me say that it is equally wrong to try and air-brush Mary out of the story or brush her under the carpet as some minor character in the purposes of God, for that she most certainly is not either.

Luke's Gospel give us the fullest account of the events leading to the birth of Jesus, but while we focus endlessly on the few verses that speak of the manger and the angels and the shepherds, there are two full chapters of detail that we tend to gloss over. This morning we read the account of Mary's visit to her relative Elizabeth who was six months pregnant with the baby who would become known as John the Baptist and who some thirty years later would prepare the way for the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. It seems that Mary went to visit Elizabeth very soon after the angel had intimated to her that she would conceive a child by the Holy Spirit and that she stayed with her much older cousin about three months, perhaps even until John the Baptist was born. These two women had a shared role in the fulfilment of God's purposes and I reckon they each gave the other a lot of support as their faith waxed and waned and their circumstances tried and tested them.

There's a lesson for us in that for a start. None of us can be a Christian on our own – of course at times we may have to plough a lonely furrow and

that is the case for many in these times of isolation, but it's not meant to be that way and all of us need the support of others as we seek to follow Christ and to serve God just as all of us have a role to play in supporting others. Is there someone you need to be seeking out in these days just as Mary sought out the advice of her older cousin and Elizabeth valued the support of her younger relative?

There's another lesson for us in the person of Mary. Those of you who are acquainted with such things may recognise that the words of this morning's text form the backbone of the Hail Mary prayer beloved of many Roman Catholics. It's important to note that the words are originally words of greeting (firstly by the angel, then by Elizabeth); they were not originally words of prayer and they only became used as a prayer well into the Middle Ages, where they were subsequently added to in a way that takes them very far from what is originally in the Scriptures.

Offering a greeting is something that all of us have done when we have met this morning – perhaps we have said hello, perhaps in these strange times from behind our masks we have simply nodded or waved. In so doing we acknowledge one another and we celebrate our fellowship as sisters and brothers of Christ. Even Jesus left his mother and brothers standing outside one time, saying 'Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven in my brother and sister and mother.' (Matthew 12:50)

We shouldn't ever underestimate what an amazing thing Mary did in agreeing to mother God's Son, but rather than exalting her as some kind of object of worship let's all ask ourselves this Christmas how we might each learn from her example in being more open to God using us in the furthering of His purposes, how we might collaborate with others as Mary did with Elizabeth in advancing God's Kingdom, how we too might be filled with the Holy Spirit and be stirred deep within by the joyful news of the coming of Christ, how we might be ready like Elizabeth to cry out in a loud voice, and prepare the way for the Lord in our time as she did in hers. We are just as blessed as Mary was when we allow Christ to be born in us and we are just as happy as she was when we believe that God's Word will be fulfilled. Don't let's make anything more of Mary than we should do but don't make light of her significant example either.

The choir are going to sing John Rutter's Christmas Lullaby which includes the words 'Ave Maria' in the chorus but here too they just describe the

greeting that angels, shepherds and wise men gave when they arrived, rather like we would say 'Hello, Mary.'

Today of all days we rejoice in the unique role Mary played in giving birth to the Son of God but let's not put her on a pedestal (where I'm quite sure she would feel deeply uncomfortable) and let's learn from her humility, for we too are recipients of God's grace and we do are called to do the will of our Father in heaven. These words, then, are as much for us as they were for Mary: 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you. Blest are you... and blest is the Child.'