



Luke 1:26-56

Mary. When you think of Christmas, then right in the middle of all the scenes is Mary. You can't miss her really. She was the one who gave birth to her firstborn son – Jesus.

Yet over the years, in some circles Mary has turned into a larger than life figure and we see pictures of the Madonna and child appearing down the centuries. Whole teachings began to develop around Mary that have no reference in the Bible or have no basis in fact at all. Mary they say was so holy that her own conception was miraculous so that she was not born sinful and never sinned in her life. So holy was she that only ever had one child, never had marital relations with Joseph, had no more children, and when she died, she was brought back to life and carried into heaven when as Queen of Heaven she now intercedes for the saints. But is that true? Well, none of what I've just said is in the Bible and none of it can be traced back to her.

But what is the truth about Mary? Who was she? Was she really a cat lover? After all, she had a Magnificat! For that matter, how many times have you heard a sermon on her? Not many I suspect. Why? Is it fear that we will be seen as Catholic to do so? If that's the case then that's silly because as we look in the Bible we find that she is a person of substance and depth. The trouble is that we can be like some who just dismiss Mary as just a vessel God used. That's never God's attitude to the race of people He loves. Besides, Mary was to be the person whose Son she was to raise. She had both and honour and a responsibility she willingly took.

As we look at her life, we find the truth more interesting than the fiction – so we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

In fact, there are three quite large passages that involve Mary in Luke's gospel: the scene in Nazareth and Judea, the shepherds and the circumcision and then the incident at the temple when Jesus was twelve – right up to the end of chapter 2. The information is unique to Luke. It has quite a bit of detail. In fact, only one person was present in all three scenes – Mary herself. So what we have is actually Luke's retelling of a story that is Mary's account.

How on earth did Luke – a Gentile physician and one of Paul's traveling companions get to come by a piece of detailed information that no other NT writer has? So detailed is this story that he could only have come across it by either talking to Mary herself (unlikely), one of her family which we know was large (we know that she had at least seven children) or a close friend. Actually if you look in Acts 21 onwards we see Luke's personal account of the trip to Jerusalem and Paul's imprisonment. Luke was kicking around for about 2 years in Judea and Galilee. What was he doing? Getting to know Jewish Christians and maybe gathering material together for a book – or two! He would have had plenty of opportunity to get to know members of Jesus' family and get hold of this kind of information. Speculation maybe, but what isn't speculation is that the Christmas story in Luke's gospel is Mary's as retold by Luke. So it's detailed and accurate. It's history, as is any other reference to Mary in the Bible because it's all based on direct eyewitness accounts. Anything about immaculate conceptions, assumptions and queens of heaven may sound fanciful but it has no basis in Scripture or in truth.

And the real truth – the Biblical truth - about Mary is quite contrary to "tradition" - Mary, Mary, quite contrary. So who was Mary? Her "Jewish" name was Miriam - a common name in those days. She was also of the royal line of David – although that was a long time ago and she was not from a rich family as she tells us herself in the Magnificat (the song of Mary which we read). From the Bible, we know is that

she was living in Nazareth at the time Gabriel visited her. *28 The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!" 29 Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. 30 The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. 31 You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, 33 and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!"*

You have found favour with God! Wow! How had she managed that? Was it a result of a pious or pure life or high status? Look at how Mary responds: *Mary said, "My heart praises the Lord; 47 my soul is glad because of God my Savior, 48 for he has remembered me, his lowly servant!* Mary realised that she was just an ordinary person, living an ordinary house in an ordinary town – and God blessed her with a high honour – bearing His Son. No reason is given for His choice of Mary. It comes down to that word we have come across time and again in the last few weeks – it was grace pure and simple. God acted in her life without merit or favour. The only actual criteria we know from prophecy that was required of the Messiah was that he must be Jewish and of the line of David. Mary filled the bill – but so did many Jewish girls at that time.

Mary was just a typical person. Ordinary. And God chose her to bear His Son. So that Son may bring ordinary people like you and me into relationship with the living God. Never feel that you are too ordinary or useless for God to do anything in your life. God took this ordinary girl from Nazareth and in her song Mary says *"My heart praises the Lord; 47 my soul is glad because of God my Savior, 48 for he has remembered me, his lowly servant! From now on all people will call me blessed, 49 because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me.* And God changed her life.

Whether you are trusting Christ or not this morning, God can change your life and change your situation – and he wants to do it. He did it in Mary's life and opened a way to do it in yours too. Will you let Him?

"But Mary was Mary, she was specially privileged. I'm weak and fallible. I've let God down in the past." Well, Mary wasn't that brilliant either. She knew God had blessed her in a special way. But of the events of Christmas all we are told is that Mary kept these things and pondered them in her heart. Pondered them. "What on earth is happening here?" On another occasion when Jesus started His ministry, she and His brothers decided He's gone mad and tried to stop Him. Big mistake. But she was there for Him even at His crucifixion. She wasn't a sinless paragon or the greatest A1 believer. But she was a mum and she stood by her son.

But it wasn't her ordinariness that makes her stand out in scripture, but how she dealt with the grace that God had shown her.

In good preacher fashion, there are three things that we can learn from Mary about responding to God's grace:

Recognized God's grace
Believed His word
Acted on Trust

So what are they?

◆ Recognized God's grace

"My heart praises the Lord; 47 my soul is glad because of God my Savior, 48 for he has remembered me, his lowly servant! From now on all people will call me happy, 49 because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me. His name is holy; 50 from one generation to another he shows mercy to those who honor him.

Mary was not rich, she was not learned – she was just ordinary but she recognised that God was being gracious to her. And she recognised that God shows mercy to those who honour Him. Whatever your situation this morning, however adequate or inadequate you feel in coming into God's presence, He wants to show you His favour – yes, you. Mary recognised that and we get those words – from now on people

will call me blessed. I still find it amazing that God loved me so much that He desired my presence – before I ever wanted His. It's the same for you. What are you going to do about it?

◆ Believed His word

So what are you going to do? God is gracious! God desires relationship with us. Isn't it stretching it to say that God desires a relationship with us? Mark, aren't you pushing the truth envelope a bit here?

Let me point you to Mary's meeting with Gabriel then: *28 The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!" 29 Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. 30 The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. 31 You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, 33 and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!" 34 Mary said to the angel, "I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?"*

Gabriel said "You're going to become pregnant" Mary said: "Yer what!! I'm a virgin!"

It was pushing truth too far. Mary knew that she wasn't going to get pregnant any time soon. Maybe you've been coming to this church a while and you've never trusted Jesus for yourself. And maybe you find all this virgin birth stuff difficult to understand. Well so was Mary. But you have problems with the rest too – all the resurrection stuff and the miracles and all that. And you can't understand what people like me see in it, but you know there's a spiritual side to your life that you need to have answers to.

Well meet Mary. Being prepared to trust God is one thing but wasn't He stretching things a bit. If that's how you feel then look at what Mary's answer was. Let's go back to Gabriel: *"35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. 36 Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. 37 For there is nothing that God cannot do." 38 "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her. 39 Soon afterward Mary got ready and hurried off to a town in the hill country of Judea. 40 She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth.*

"OK", said Gabriel "then check out your relative Elizabeth – she's pregnant even though she's way beyond childbearing age – so there's nothing impossible to God". Mary knew that it was humanly impossible for Elizabeth to have children." So she accepts Gabriel's message - *"I am the Lord's servant,; may it happen to me as you have said."* Nice mature words you think. Not quite – the first thing she does is rush off to Elizabeth's to see if it's true! And finds out it is in style.

Whether you're a believer or not, God does not expect anyone to believe in fairy stories or commit intellectual suicide to be a Christian. Check it out. There's plenty of books out there that go through the issues. But there's plenty of us here who have experience of the power of God in our lives. I'm not asking you to believe it just because it's in the Bible – I'm asking you to believe it because there are hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands even in this country that claim to have a living relationship with God – and we want you to have it too.

Start praying. Get somebody to pray for you.

◆ Trust led to action

But what Mary did next is truly the most outstanding thing about this woman of faith. She was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Where she was in Judea, she was safe. She was in the "miracle" household of Zechariah and Elizabeth where she was believed and safe. But back in Nazareth she had a fiance waiting? What about him. And then there was to town? What would people say? And what about the religious zealots who would push that she was stoned? Who was going to believe her? Joseph didn't. And then having taken her step of faith, found that God honoured that by dealing with Joseph.

And we see Mary at many stages of Jesus' life. And just as she was at His birth, she was there at the cross when most of His followers had fled. Someone once said that faith is spelt RISK. In Mary we see a women

who understood the privilege that God had given her – to give birth to and raise His Son – and who based steps of faith on that and found that God blessed her in them. She is one of the giants of faith in the NT. It started with God's grace and ended with a woman of faith. And a woman of faith in whose home Jesus was brought up.

And what about you? I've already challenged you about understanding God's grace. If you realise that God has been gracious to you – then you have to act. The evidence is there just trust Jesus. It works!

If you are a Christian – how far are you prepared to go with Jesus? How far are you prepared to go to follow Him? What risks are you prepared to take. We prove God and His power in our lives as we are prepared to trust Him – like Mary did – however dangerous that seems. The train illustration. Faith isn't about belief, but it's about trust but He deserves it – because God was prepared to take action to rescue us by sending His Son to die on the cross for us. So what is our response. Isaac Watts.

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life my all.

*Preached by Mark Reid
Maidstone Road Baptist Church, Felixstowe
23rd December 2007
© Mark Reid 2007
Scripture quotes TEV*