

#### **Fourth Sunday in Advent. 24 December 2017. Mary's YES.**

There's something about Mary. That is the title of an amusing movie made a few years ago. A quirky movie about a woman who seemed to have an effect on the lives of people around her, yet she was not really aware of the impact she was having. She was just being herself.

There's something about Mary. The Mary we just read about in the Gospel reading (Luke 1:26-38). There is something attractive and amazing about her. Have you ever thought that? I have. There is something extraordinary about her. And yet it is something ordinary. Very ordinary. The very thing that is ordinary is what is extraordinary. In her world and in ours. She is open. She is transparent. She sees what she sees and she is not cynical, or out to see what is in the world for her. Her heart is open and she responds to the offer made to her with reasonable questions and reasonable credulity and reasonable apprehension YET with an open heart. Mary was just being herself.

By holy tradition her parents were Joachim and Anna, devout people who had brought their daughter up to love God. They had brought her up with a pure heart. The time in which Mary grew up was a violent era. There was a lot to be afraid of. The Roman army occupied Jerusalem and the Holy Land and their way of enforcing rule was through brutal control. The local Jewish rulers were allowed some degree of control over the population but they were also corrupt and brutal. People on the fringes of that society were treated poorly. Mary had grown up in Jerusalem, a place where people without some good street-smarts were vulnerable to the control of others.

I wonder how she came to be engaged to a tradesman in the far north of the country? Joseph's character, as it shines through the story, depicts him as a good man, an honest man, someone who was grounded in his faith, respectful, caring, loving, faithful.

We have been through a change recently to the laws governing marriage in this country. In our modern mindset we have tended to think that marriage has always had a particular pattern, yet among people of God's family marriage and the patterns which have brought people together in committed relationships have been incredibly diverse. For most of Christian history and throughout the pattern of the life of the people of God up to the time of Jesus, polygamy was common, even expected. Unusually Mary seems to have been one woman with one man. That was not the usual biblical pattern, but it seems to have been how Joseph and Mary lived.

Patterns of engagement have also varied. There have been times across Christian history and beyond into the earlier story of the people of God where a marriage was only confirmed after it was proven that a woman was fertile. So, while Mary comments on her youth and, at least in the Greek text of this passage, that she and Joseph had not yet had sexual relations, a pregnancy BEFORE the marriage was celebrated was not actually unusual. As the story continues we find that Mary and Joseph still hadn't 'tied the knot' in the following nine months. they were still only 'engaged' when Jesus was born.

Marriage as a celebration of their relationship was still to come, and would have been undiminished in its joy by the presence of a child. Attitudes to children born out of wedlock and unmarried mothers come from Victorian stuffiness and puritanical ideas, not from biblical approaches to commitment and love and marriage and celebration of the relationships into which we are drawn and which we celebrate before God.

So, for this extraordinary, ordinary woman, Mary, her pregnancy was not a situation of shame. Her openness to God was a beautiful thing though. Her openness to be part of a plan which was beyond her comprehension, her 'yes' was like a light being turned on. In Mary's heart there was love. In her response there was trust.

We live in a time when trust has been broken. The church community used to be a place where trust could be expected to be honoured. Clergy used to be people who were considered among the most trusted identified groups of people in our society. That has broken down through the betrayal of trust. Clergy and the church community are viewed with suspicion by many people who have been part of church communities and by many people around us who have never heard the message we share but know us only as a place of shame. I was talking recently with a member of this parish about why people 'out there' don't see the church as a place of welcome, a place to come and explore life. The abuse which has happened was high on the list of reasons.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse recently handed down its findings. There were hundreds of recommendations about ways in which we can improve how we are as community, including church communities. We are working through those recommendations and most are already in place within the Anglican Church in this Diocese. There is still a long way to go and it may take generations before the church is able to be free of the taint of what has been revealed, of what has been done both by perpetrators and by those in authority who responded without due care for vulnerable people. We need to rebuild trust and we do that by being trustworthy.

There is something about Mary, something inspiring, as she is simply being who she is. She is trusting AND she is a person who is worthy of being trusted.

As we approach the celebration of Christmas the focus is on Jesus. Yet, there is something about Mary to recognise, and celebrate and to take as inspiration.

Amen

**Paul Mitchell.**