

We used to live near Kensington. And I was once outraged on Kensington High Street. I was walking down the street, past the antique shop, and they decorated their window for Christmas. There was the usual trappings there; a star, wise men, shepherds and baby Jesus, except Jesus wasn't lying in a manger. The baby Jesus was being carried by a stork.

I don't normally get angry about such sacreligious imagery, but something about that scene pushed my buttons. It wasn't just that the scene was offensive; what really got me was that it corrupted a key part of the Christmas story, which is the complex relationship between God and Mary, the mother of Jesus. And I want to spend a few minutes looking at the story of the Annunciation that we've heard and drawing out what is lost if you think that there's a stork involved in the story.

The first thing to note is that Mary was humbled and God lifted her up. The humility of Mary is a very key part of the nativity story. The word comes twice in the Magnificat Mary's song, which comes just after the passage that we've just heard. Mary says, "The Lord has been mindful of the humble state of her servant and God has lifted up the humble."

Mary's humility was in stark contrast to the British boxer, Prince Naseem Hamed, who enjoyed a brief year or two in the limelight some time ago. He was known as well for his great boxing skills for his enormous ego. Someone once asked him something. It was an air stewardess who asked him on a plane to put on his seatbelt, to which the boxer replied, "Superman don't need no seatbelt." The quick-witted air stewardess said to him in response, "Superman don't need no plane. Now put your seatbelt on."

God, via Gabriel, asked something of Mary: "You will be with child and give birth to a son." Mary's humble, obedient response has echoed down the ages: "I am the servant of the Lord," she said. "Let it be to me, according to your word." There are so many things Mary could have said. She could have replied, "Well, hang on a minute. Don't you think there's another way of doing this?" And I'm sure there was, but she simply says, "Let it be to me, according to your word."

And it was because of this humble, obedient attitude that God was able to work with Mary to change the course of human history. God lifted her up. He lifts up the humble like Mary, and Mary was given an amazing task. It's so easy to underestimate Mary. She's always depicted as a rather demure, passive character. And talk of humility and obedience can reinforce this stereotype. But Mary is no mere appendage to this story. She wasn't simply a surrogate mother. God just wasn't simply borrowing her womb. Think about it. God entrusted to Mary the nurturing of his son, Jesus. Jesus came from God and spoke of love. Where did he learn that love? Surely from his mother, Mary.

Mary, the simple, humble young woman was given a key role in the building of the kingdom of God. She was most definitely lifted up. God worked with Mary in partnership, which is so characteristic of God's dealings with his people that we see revealed in scripture. He doesn't simply impose his will; rather, he invites a response. That's why humility and obedience are so important. Without them, the work of God can be hindered and limited.

Moving on, God spoke to Mary and Mary believed. As we prepare to hear the Christmas story again over the next couple of weeks, listen out for how many ways and how many times God speaks with the characters in the story. Angels are forever popping up in the narrative, passing on a message from God as in the passage that we just heard earlier. And this is clearly a very special time in history, but I don't think it's unique. I believe God has and continues to speak with his people in many and various ways, primarily through the word of the Bible but also through creation, other people, dreams, even angels. The question is are we listening? I talked last week about the advent discipline of paying attention. We pay attention to God in the hope and belief that he has something to say to us.

Thirdly, God did great things for Mary and Mary praised God and rejoiced. See how her song begins: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior, for the mighty one has done great things for me." Great things. The most obvious thing that God has done for Mary is to make her pregnant.

And this is a culture where unmarried mothers were often stoned.

There was once a nativity play written by the children themselves. The dialogue included the following immortal passage. Joseph: "Can we have a room please?" The innkeeper: "No, we're full up." Joseph: "My wife is expecting a baby." Innkeeper: "That's not my fault." Joseph: "It's not my fault either."

Mary state was God's fault. He was the source of the difficulty and embarrassment in the situation, and yet Mary was able to praise God for this unexpected, unexplained thing. She accepted God's divine timing. She lived out St. Paul's injunction that we've heard: to rejoice, always. She rejoiced in all things, even in the difficult things. Remember what she said: "Let it be to me according to your word."

There's something about Mary's example, which is particularly striking in this time of pandemic. It's not just the way she could accept and rejoice in the challenging call on her life. It's also in the way she waited. Mary is a figure who waits. And we've seen too in recent weeks that advent is about waiting. Mary waited well. She received a promise and waited patiently. The waiting of pregnancy is significant. Nobody wants the end to come early or prematurely because it's in the waiting that the baby in the womb is being formed. We talk of a pregnant pause. And that's not just a moment's silence. It's a silence full of meaning and growth and significance. Mary's pregnancy wasn't simply a nine month hiatus between the miraculous conception and the birth. It was a time when the baby Jesus was growing and developing in her womb.

This pandemic involves lots of waiting. We could see it simply as a gap between last March and whenever a vaccine finally comes around, or we could see it as a pregnant pause in our lives. I think there are things that are gestating in our own community, in this quiet, still time of pandemic. There are things that are happening, which will have, I think, a long-term benefit. For example, we've discovered the benefits of modern technology. And we've grown in more spiritual ways too. I've been encouraged to hear from lots of people who've told me how the sermons in this time of pandemic and the readings have

particularly hit home and had an effect on us. And I'm so pleased to hear that. And I'm pleased too that we've learned to focus on the Bible and the text.

Many of us have felt God speaking to us through the Bible in new and direct ways. We're getting better at discerning the prompting of God. We've had to bring faith too into our homes. Our spiritual lives are no longer restricted to what goes on in church. There are things we can do at home, in the family, to develop our faith.

And on a more practical note, close observers of our website will know that the organ project is underway and we've seen photographs of the exciting first bits of the organ starting to take shape there in New York state.

I hope that I've shared something of how Mary, the mother of Jesus, the queen of heaven, can speak to us in this time of COVID. She was humble and God lifted her up. God spoke to Mary and Mary believed. God did great things for Mary and Mary rejoiced, and Mary received a promise and she waited patiently. Amen.