

Sunday 14th December 2014
Mary the Mother of Jesus

It is school nativity time once again, at work we had had them all, the shepherds, the inn keeper, the kings, sheep, chickens, donkeys, angels and of course Mary.

Mum's looking for an outfit for their child, we had a Mum this week looking for a Mary outfit - ours was a bit too plain, the little girl wanted it to be sparkly, not sure what Mum did, she didn't buy an outfit.

Our images of Mary and the other characters mostly come from Medieval artists. The fact remains that we know very little about Mary, Mary the mother of Jesus.

There are very few mentions of her in our Bible.

We get most of what we do know from Luke's gospel:

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town called Nazareth. In ancient Jewish custom Mary could have been betrothed at about 12, but there is no direct evidence of Mary's age at betrothal or in pregnancy. Joseph could have been about 30 possibly a widower.

We are not told of Mary's parents, brothers, sisters or their reaction to the news that the angel brought. By tradition Joachim and Anne are considered to be the names of the parents of Mary, we get the oldest story from a second century document called the Gospel of James.

But Mary's parents must have had a huge influence upon her.

In John 19:25 it states that Mary had a sister also named Mary, but she is perhaps more likely to be a sister in law, the wife of Joseph's brother, Clopas - according to the early second century historian, Hegesippus.

Mary is called 'favoured one' by the angel, on hearing the message from the angel Mary having asked only one thing 'How can this be, since I am a virgin' and when told by the angel and also about Elizabeth her cousin she said 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

With what she has just heard, that seems an amazing response, the words Pat sang at Mary last week in the Inn Crowd would seem rather fitting 'Why pick on me, why what have I done, why pick on my.....'

But of course Mary was a good Jewish girl living in first century Palestine, she knew her scripture, how they have longed for the Messiah, the promise of deliverance that Yahwe will again visit his people to bring forgiveness and healing. With Mary there is a fundamental acceptance that we live in world which is not controlled by human design or whim, that at the very centre of the universe is a Creator God, who makes everything that is alive, this is the context in which Mary hears the angel's message.

To be the servant of the Lord has enormous implications for anyone, death to self, giving up our own ambitions, putting ourselves at God's disposal.

And for Mary, it must have made life very difficult, putting a strain on her

relationship with Joseph and her family and you can imagine the whole town would have had a field day if Joseph did not accept her as his wife.

Mary hurried to see her cousin Elizabeth, who had also had a visit from an angel and was pregnant. On hearing Mary's voice the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy and Mary said the words that we call the magnificat, sometimes called the Song of Mary, it is said or sung all across the land each day.

I would just like to read the words.

*MY soul doth magnify the Lord, * and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded * the lowliness of his handmaiden.
For behold, from henceforth * all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath magnified me; * and holy is his Name.
And his mercy is on them that fear him * throughout all generations.
He hath showed strength with his arm; * he hath scattered the proud in the
imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat, * and hath exalted the humble and
meek.
He hath filled the hungry with good things; * and the rich he hath sent empty away.
He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel; * as he promised to our
forefathers, Abraham and his seed, for ever.*

Mary and Elizabeth had something very special to share, neither had expected to be pregnant, and for both God's miraculous power had been involved. And the hospitality they shared, each carrying a very special baby and each caring and supporting each other.

It was at the temple that Mary and Joseph met Simeon and Anna and Simeon blessed them and finished by telling Mary that a sword will pierce your own soul too.

And after Jesus was found to be missing after the visit to Jerusalem, when they go back to Nazareth we are told that Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

Turn the clock forward 18 years and only in the Gospel of John do we hear about the Wedding at Cana, when it is she who tells Jesus that they have run out of wine, and although Jesus response if 'my time has not yet come,' she tells the servants to do what he tells them ..and you know the rest.

There is no mention of Joseph here, perhaps he has died.

At the scene of the crucifixion, Mary and John are at the foot of the cross and Jesus says to John 'Behold your Mother' and to Mary 'Behold your Son' we can only imagine the pain she felt watching her son die.

As parents we do not want our children hurting, and would do anything to take away the pain.

On that first Easter Day when John and Peter go to the tomb, what joy must have filled Mary's heart when John returned to his house and told her the news.

In the 19th century, a house near Ephesus in Turkey was found, based on the visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich, and Augustinian nun in Germany. It has since been visited as the House of the Virgin Mary by many pilgrims who consider it the place where Mary lived until her assumption. The gospel of John tells us that Mary went to live with the disciple. Irenaeus and Eusebius of Caesarea wrote in their histories that John later went to Ephesus, which may provide the basis for the early belief that Mary also lived in Ephesus with John.

Christian devotion to Mary goes back to the 2nd century, over the centuries devotion and veneration has varied greatly among Christian traditions. Of all the saints whom the Orthodox venerate, the most honoured is Mary, who is considered more honourable than the Cherubim and more glorious than the Seraphim. Although the Catholics and the Orthodox may honour and venerate Mary, they do not view her as divine, nor do they worship her.

In painting, Mary is traditionally portrayed in blue. This can trace its origin to the Byzantine Empire from 500AD, where blue was 'the colour of an empress.' A more practical explanation is that in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, the blue pigment was derived from the rock lapis lazuli, a stone imported from Afghanistan of greater value than gold. It was an expression of devotion and glorification to swathe the virgin in gowns of blue.

In his book about praying with the icons of Mary, Rowan Williams said "It is not only that we cannot understand Mary without seeing her as pointing to Christ; we cannot understand Christ without seeing his attention to Mary."

For a number of years I have been lucky enough to join an annual pilgrimage to The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk. Lady Richelis had a vision of Mary and was told that she should build a house a replica of her house in Nazareth, it is often called England's Nazareth and pilgrims have gone there for hundreds of years.

It is a very special place, a spiritual place, a place to be and to venerate Mary. A group of us from here go, if you would like to know more please ask.

And we should take a leaf out of Mary's book and treasure all these things in our heart, and pray that we too might be favoured by God and that He will grant us Mary's astonishing courage, patience, humility and strength to answer Him when He calls.

Amen.