

Sermon at inauguration of the Cell of Mary, our Lady of Faith

St Faith's Church, Havant 3rd November 2016

"Blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Lk 1.45)

Our knowledge of Mary as our mother in faith begins when she received Gabriel's message at the Annunciation.

Her first reaction was unsurprising. "Discombobulated" is not a bad translation of the word St Luke uses; but she didn't run away but tried rather to discern "what sort of greeting this might be."

The angel's explanation didn't help very much but she still didn't argue the toss. Instead she simply asked *"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*

The angel assured her that God was in charge - and had moreover already worked a miracle for her aged and childless cousin Elizabeth who was now six months pregnant, against all the odds.

Nothing, concluded the angel, will be impossible for God.

The incident finishes with Mary saying, *"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*

This is the first explicit knowledge we have of Mary's faith. But we may be sure that her declaration had a prehistory.

The Bible presents Mary as a member of the particular category of faithful Jewish people, known as the poor of Israel. This group features prominently in the *Magnificat*, Mary's song which the church still recites every day at evening prayer.

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.

The reference to Abraham is not accidental. The whole of Jewish and Christian faith rests on God's promises to Abraham and his faithful response to God.

Mary learnt this faith from her parents. She knew she belonged to a people who had no earthly claim to greatness, but who trusted completely in God.

So it was that she was able to respond to the angel - in faith but not without struggling to understand. As a great early Christian teacher put it: *"She conceived in her heart before she conceived in her womb."*

To have a faith like Mary's means knowing we too are children of Abraham; it means putting our whole trust in God and God alone, it means waiting patiently for God to reveal his purposes for us; it means intelligent questioning and humble obedience.

With God, nothing is impossible.