

## St John the Baptist, Catford

2 Samuel 7:1-11,16

Psalm 89

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

What do you rely on to get you through life?

Who do you trust will be there for you, to understand what you need, never to let you down?

Do you have such a person?

And, if you don't, what gets you get through when times are tough?

Given the year we've had, and we've all had slightly different years of course – different pressures,

different griefs, different stresses; but given the year that you've had, how has it left you feeling about what lies ahead in 2021?

Are you the kind of person who gets massively stressed if you can't plan for what's coming up, because it's so unpredictable?

Or are you the kind of person who is resigned to whatever lies round the corner?

Or are you perhaps more philosophical, following the serenity prayer, which prays for: grace

*To accept the things I cannot change; Courage to change the things I can; And wisdom to know the difference [?]*

This year has certainly tested all of our coping mechanisms, particularly for dealing with the uncertainty of what lies round the corner.

It may not surprise you to know that I am the kind of person who likes to have everything in order, and am really *not* very good at dealing with the stress of uncertainty over things I can't do anything about.

Stress over things I can affect I'm fine with. The adrenalin flows, and I come alive. I used to love standing up in court and trying to persuade an often terrifying judge that their first impression of my case was wrong.

But something over which I have *no* control or influence, I find deeply, deeply stressful.

I therefore need to learn from Mary; and if you are at all like me, then so do you.

Her 'yes' to God was necessary for the incarnation, for God coming among us as one of us, in Jesus Christ. That yes of hers was necessary for our salvation. She said yes for the sake of all of humanity.

She is normally held up as being the prime example of humility. Of having so little human pride (or indeed none) that she simply meekly accepted Gabriel's words to her, and so assented to her pivotal role in our salvation.

And yet, firstly, she is in my view far, far stronger than that caricature implies. She answers back after all: '*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*'

And when she is told what will come about, her words, '*Here am I*' sound to me the epitome of

strength; rather than rolling over to the angel, to God's will.

But for me the critical thing about Mary, and the primary reason why she is such a role model for all of us, women *and men*, is her trust.

Gabriel tells her, '*Do not be afraid,*' but then goes on to tell her that '*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.*'

How is she *not* to be afraid, *not* to be staggered? At the very least not to carry on with questions – more '*How can this be?*'

And yet, she says '*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*'

And then she is left alone with this alarming, wondrous news.

Her life, and that of all creation, is changed forever.

And despite both the alarming, terrifying news, and being left alone, she trusts in God.

And later, in the Temple, she is told by Simeon that a sword will pierce her heart; and yet she continues to trust.

When we are faced with uncertainty - to put it at its lowest, and, at worst, perhaps not even knowing how we will be able to carry on given some of the things we face, are we similarly able to trust that, somehow, all shall be well?

That is not to say glibly that everything is always fine, but that God is always with us; and so, whatever we face, we can trust Him.

I know plenty of people whose lives might look sorted from the outside who are always stressed about what is round the corner: whether their job is safe, whether they are on track with their career, whether they'll get their promotion; whether their children will do as well as they hope in exams.

And I know plenty of people whose lives might look harder from the outside who *are* able to trust in God. So this is not about some people just being able to trust because things tend to work out fine; and others finding it difficult to, because things tend *not* to.

This is about a *deeper* trust, a deeper faith in God, which Mary is the chief example of.

Can we say with Mary, '*Be it unto me according to thy word,*' in the old translation?

And with Jesus on the Cross, '*Into your hands O Lord, I commend my spirit?*'

This is not a test, and we all fail to trust enough in this life.

But I hope we can be inspired by Mary's example.

She can seem a distant figure, so idealised into the ideal woman, normally based on men's projections, that her example for each of us as an individual can be hard to see.

And yet she is a real woman, in a real place, at a particular time in history.

We get that at the start of this passage:

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

It telescopes down, rather like those opening scenes in films, starting up in space, zooming into a continent, then a country, then an area, then a road, then a house, then a person.

If a similar story were to start, saying:

On the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the twelfth month, an angel was sent by God to a suburb of London called Catford, to

a worshipper in a church dedicated to St John the Baptist, and that person's name was...

Might you also say with Mary, *'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'?*

Don't worry, you don't have to answer that now.

But this Christmas, as 2020 thankfully draws to a close, take some time to ask yourself whether you really trust God to hold you and be with you in what lies ahead in 2021.

And if you don't, try repeating Mary's words to yourself in prayer:

*Here am I... Let it be with me according to your word.*

Repeat them over and over again.

Try it now.

Other faiths use mantras more than ours for a reason.

Inhabit Mary's words.

Be ready to receive Jesus into your hearts this Christmas, trusting Him with your future.

He knew you before you were knit together in your mother's womb. And He will receive you into his bosom when you die.

Ask Mary to pray for you to have the same trust that she had.

There is a reason why we pray:

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,*

*Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus;*

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen*