

Advent Meditation on Mary

“Of all women, you are the most blessed” (Luke 1:42)

So says Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, to Mary as Mary awaits the birth of Jesus.



What does it mean to be blessed?

For it is not just Mary who is blessed.

Each of us asks a blessing on ourselves and others every time we meet for worship - “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore.”

I guess a simple definition of being blessed would be something like this: To be blessed is in some sense to know God’s presence, to be at one with God, to anticipate the Kingdom of God in this life, to be liberated from our failings, to be filled with the

Spirit...

The old chorus bids us “Count your blessings, name them one by one” and suggests that God’s blessing is there for everyone of us, and it is good to recognize and count the blessings in our lives.

BUT there is a danger that “counting our blessings” turns into something dangerously like ticking off which presents we have received from our Christmas Wish List - a list of luxuries and comforts.

So someone will say “I have been blessed with a happy family, a good job, a nice house and a big car...”

Of course we should be grateful for such things - and certainly not take them for granted - but having this sort of list of possessions and attributes is not necessarily the same thing as being blessed... and this is where we meet Mary and must have a closer look at her.

Mary was, according to Elizabeth, most blessed amongst women...

And for Mary being blessed did not mean “having a happy family” - in any conventional sense - an unmarried mother fleeing the brutality of Herod’s soldiers, bringing up a child whom she will see executed in his early 30s...

So, what does it mean to be blessed?

Mary was chosen - not an easy road but a blessed road.

Mary of Nazareth, barely beyond childhood herself, was called by God to give birth to a child of her own.

And often people interpreted Mary's response to the angel Gabriel's invitation as unquestioning obedience and humility. Often they lift up Mary as a model of passivity for all women. Yet when we listen closely, we can hear the voice of a strong, active woman – a woman who dared to question Gabriel, a woman whom Gabriel did not leave until she had spoken her words of acceptance.

Let it be. The words sound like whispers to ears that have always heard them as inevitable, as the only response to a demanding God. But if we draw closer, what will we find out about Mary being blessed and the road she chose to go down?

To many of us reading or hearing the story of Mary, it is like reading or hearing a story of where we already know the ending. We know that Joseph is not going to abandon her. The penalty for a virgin being with a child was after all death. We know everything is going to be alright. Therefore, we might find it new and challenging to imagine what incredible courage this young woman needed when she said: "May it happen to me as you have said".

Can we imagine the story as if we didn't know the ending?

Can we imagine the danger of Mary's decision – the risk she took of being ridiculed, discriminated against, killed?

And can we imagine what it means to be blessed in that context?

"Of all women, you are the most blessed".

In the shadows of Mary's assent to "let it be" lies the possibility that she can choose to let it not be.

There is an old legend which says Mary was not the first young woman approached by Gabriel to bear God's son. The angel had called others before, but they had not said yes...

What about the man who was to marry Mary? To what extent was she blessed through him, and where lay the blessing in his life? Joseph stood by Mary because he too had heard the voice of God and he too believed that Mary's submission to God's purposes would bring new life to the whole human community.

Joseph too was going against custom and tradition, when he took a pregnant woman for wife. We never stop to think how embarrassing his own position was. What would his parents say? His friends?

Here was a man who stood in solidarity with a woman he loved and trusted. A man who had an ear tuned to what God is saying to him and to the world.

Just imagine Joseph at Mary's side... and try to think of situations in which you were blessed with a spouse or a friend standing utterly and fully at your side...

Mary found the blessing of solidarity and support in her husband to be, and in her cousin and best friend Elizabeth.

Where do we find it?

Luke's account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth immediately follows Gabriel's departure from Mary. Having boldly assented to bear the Christ, Mary found herself suddenly alone. Young and unwed, Mary's awe at Gabriel's invitation probably gave way to fear, dismay, and a sense of isolation. Who would believe her? ... listen to her? ... comfort her?

We do not know whether Mary decided to visit Elizabeth because they had been close friends for a long time or because Mary simply had no one else to whom she could turn.

But we do know, as Mary did, that her elder relative had experienced, as Mary had, a miraculous conception of her own. This fact alone may have assured Mary to act and journey, alone and with haste as the text tells us, to see Elizabeth.

Surely Elizabeth's welcome assured Mary that she had done well to come to visit her.

Blessed by Elizabeth for her faithfulness, Mary broke forth into a song full of praise for the liberation God had brought.

The blessing, praise and liberation that flowed out of Mary and Elizabeth's meeting serve as a model for how we, in worship and all of life, should bless and call forth one another's gifts.

"Of all women, you are the most blessed".

A lesson to be learned in Mary's story is how to receive a blessing that causes more problems than it solves.

"How can this be," these words must have kept going through Mary's head over and over again.

How could this happen? This was not the way Mary had planned her life.

How do you defend a blessing you cannot explain?

How do you live with a blessing that creates more problems than it solves?

Elizabeth's greeting affirmed Mary's faith. With this show of solidarity from another woman, Mary's doubts disappeared. Yes, blessed was she who believed that the promise made to her by God would be fulfilled.

With such solidarity and assurance Mary felt liberated. She was liberated from her fears and misgivings, from her feelings of weakness and inadequacy. She realized what it actually meant to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, and how such power can reverse all natural human order.

Mary was blessed with powerful words and the will to change the world.

She was no politician, no revolutionary; she just wanted to sing a happy song, but all of a sudden she'd become an articulate radical, an astonished prophet singing about a world in which the last have become the first, and the first last.

And her song puts it all in the past tense. As if the hungry have already been fed and the rich already lived without their unjust possessions ... How can that be?

There was this tiny being growing in Mary's womb, and she was already singing of his great deeds as if they were history.

Mary's faith was in things not seen, faith that came to her from outside herself, and this is why we call her blessed.

Advent reminds us that we are a pregnant people. God calls us to bring forth the Christ.

Conception and birthing of the holy does not depend on physical pregnancy.

Birthing in a spiritual sense, when we make the story of Mary giving birth our own story, contains the wide range of our creative abilities – abilities that enable us to bring forth such gifts as children, dreams, hopes, justice, peace, relationships, art, new ways of living, and ourselves.

The women in the Advent stories, especially Mary, call us to ponder what it means to bring forth the holy in our lives...

What creative abilities do we have?

What journeys can we make and what support can we offer?

What are our gifts and talents?

What are we blessed with?

Mary had a baby to birth.

It was time.

What emotions must have gripped Mary and Joseph as Mary lay, homeless and a stranger, in the labour of giving birth?

As her child struggled his way into the world, did Mary maybe regret her choice? Did she still feel blessed and remember the awesome song she had sung a couple of months before?

From where did she draw her strength? ...way away from home and later on their escape to Egypt?

Did anyone hear her cries? Notice her fear? See her tears?

Would we call all this "blessed"?

Mary was chosen

Not for an easy road,

but for a blessed road.

She said yes.

We too are chosen,

Will we say yes to God?

...and go down the hard, unfamiliar and difficult road?

...and still call it "blessed"?