

Message: Feast of the Virgin Mary, 15 Aug 2021

I assume that today's gospel passage is a bit more recognizable than most readings. Those of us who 'grew up' with the Book of Common Prayer, are most familiar with a slightly different phrasing that begins:

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.

Most of know that this is called 'The Magnificat' which is a Latin title from the first word in the Latin translation.

Let's examine the story up to the point where the Gospel reading begins.

According to tradition, Mary resided "in her own house" in the town of Nazareth in Galilee, most likely living with her parents. It was during her betrothal, which was the first traditional stage of a Jewish marriage—that she was visited by the angel Gabriel who announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of the promised Messiah by conceiving him through the Holy Spirit. At first she expressed surprise at the announcement, she responded, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done unto me according to your word."

Joseph planned to quietly divorce her, (a divorce would be required since they were betrothed - even if they were not married at that time). However, Joseph was told in a dream by "an angel of the Lord"; that her conception was by the Holy Spirit. The angel told him to not hesitate to take Mary as his

wife, which Joseph did, thereby formally completing the wedding rites.

Now Mary's aunt Elizabeth enters the story. She was actually the sister of Anna who was Mary's mother. The angel Gabriel had told Mary the news that Elizabeth—having previously been barren—was then miraculously pregnant, so Mary hurried to see Elizabeth, who was living with her husband Zechariah in "Hebron, in the hill country of Judah". Mary arrived at the house and greeted Elizabeth. It was then that Elizabeth called Mary "the mother of my Lord".

You might then guess that it was then that the magnitude of the situation became absolutely apparent to Mary. It was then that Mary spoke the words of praise that became known as the *Magnificat*. After about three months, Mary made the long and dangerous journey back to Nazareth, a distance of about 130 Km.

There are a number of reasons why Mary has been so honoured by Christians over the ages.

Obviously Mary is the mother of Our Lord - that in itself might be enough. The ancient church referred to Mary as the 'Theotokos' - which is a term in the ancient Greek that means 'God bearer

The story that we have just examined is a remarkable set of events.

We might wonder, why was this fairly young woman from a basically peasant background, in an area considered to be a 'backwater town' be chosen to be the 'God Bearer' to be the human mother of the Messiah, the anointed one? There were some other complicating factors too: She was betrothed to Joseph, but at the time of the Annunciation by the Angel Gabriel, not yet married - that is why she was still living with her parents Anne and Joachim.

There was another complicating factor: in those ancient times, a woman becoming pregnant outside of the bonds of marriage was considered fairly serious. Remember she was betrothed, but not yet married. So Mary and coincidentally also Joseph would be under considerable threat, it was a dangerous situation. Very often, the communities response would be to stone Mary, and possibly Joseph. Mary was under a very real death threat.

So why was she chosen? I guess the answer was that she was a woman of great faith, her depth of faith made her the choice to be the 'God bearer'. She was also surrounded by others of depend abiding faith. Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Anna, and Joachim.

So, how should this story impinge upon us today in our time.

Well today we are performing a Baptism, we are incorporating another albeit young person into the Body of Christ. It is through Baptism that we are called into being servants of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We call this the Ministry of the Baptized. In a number of the churches where I was the clergy person in charge, instead of having the name of the clergy person and possibly the name of the organist on the front to the pew leaflet, I would put a line that said, "Ministers The Congregation" and in much smaller type Priest in Charge with my name.

Baptism is our commissioning and the job description is found in the New Testament. The chief instructions for us are: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul, and the second instruction is that Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thy self. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

We are to reflect on these commandments and all the teaching of Jesus in everything we do, and always do absolutely everything possible to make this a better world. Maybe with some luck we might have some of the depth of faith that Mary had, and be able to take on any task that God might direct us toward, no matter what the cost or danger.