

## Unpicking The Mystery of Christmas

I heard this week of a retired minister who can no longer bear anything to do with Christmas.

If you were to calculate that including School Assemblies and other services, that a minister will probably be involved in something like a dozen Christmas services per year., and that a minister will probably be so for 35 years.

Then that is about 500 Christmas messages.

And say this minister is particularly efficient and manages to recycle their Christmas messages, say at a rate of 50% (that's counting on the fact that people have short memories), then that is something like 250 original Christmas messages that you draw from two chapters in Matthew, two in Luke and 18 verses in John. Mark contributes nothing, he saves his chapters for thirty years later. That's a heavy load to bear.

In particular, one verse, Luke 1:7, does a lot of heavy lifting

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no place for him at the inn."

Quite a lot of biblical scholars argue that the word Inn does not mean inn, but probably means "guest room", and there probably was not stable, and Christian preachers are like "go away, we don't need to know such balloon bursting truths; it's hard enough to write those 250 original messages, and now you expect us to do it without the stable".

"Begone" you faithless, scrooge-like scholars with your stable-denying humbug.

And yet, the wonder is, and whisper it, getting the 250 messages isn't actually as hard as you might think, because when you draw into the mystery, when you get really close to it, when you pay attention, when you let the wonder hit you, all the libraries in all the world could not contain all the books that could be written.

Draw near to this, and you will be like a shepherd leaving the stable/guest room, you will tell everyone the wonder of what you have just encountered.

And the veritable queen of Christmas wonder is a young person - quite right - because young people have continued to teach older people the wonder of Christmas. It's a girl who is probably aged 12 when all of this happens.

She is by herself, we don't know where when an angel appears. An angel is just a messenger - he would be unlikely to have wings, because if you have wings, then all people will talk about will be the wings, and the halo, and they won't pay attention to what it is that you have to say. The messenger knows that the importance of the message, so they will do everything to keep the focus on the message, so they won't have wings, or if they do have wings, they will keep them hidden.

And the angel appears and says "Greetings" which is a standard thing to say

And "The Lord is with you" which is a standard thing to say

But sandwiched between those two words, is a name, that up to this point has never been used of an individual. "Most favoured one".

That is a word of intense, unique, powerful blessing, powerful gift.

"Most gifted one". It actually sounds a lot like Hannah in the original Hebrew, so it even has the sense of a naming ceremony, indeed when Native people's here this story, that is what they hear, they hear a naming ceremony.

Mary knows that something awesome is happening here, something beyond words, there is a meaning to what is going on that is deeper than the the logic of the words.

Do we ever associate this ability to know what is going on, more deeply than the surface, with a particular group in our society? A particular gender perhaps who are good at discerning deeper meaning? And do we have a group who are sometimes less good at discerning the deeper meaning?

Mary is in the deep-meaning group. And this is going to continue throughout the story, so if you are a thinker, if you are someone who picks up on things, with an intensity that is sometimes hard to bear, this story is for you.

In fact that words here for wonder and think about and be disturbed, are also unique intense words, Mary can think about things with an intensity that is very rare, and seems to be very much part of why she is the woman for this occasion. If you are a ponderer, a deep-thinker, a muller, then this gift of yours can sometimes tip over into what the psychologists call rumination, where you think the same thoughts again and again, but if those thoughts lead you to God, which is the good side of this gift, then this story is about how God loves that about you.

Then the Angel says, Fear not, for God is with you, for you have found favour from God.

That is the story here - that we are in a context of favour - you can deal with so much more when you are in a context of favour, of being looked after, of knowing that God has you.

I have told this story before, but I keep coming back to it. Of someone in our community, who actually would say they don't believe in God, but telling me a story when they were a young parent, and all sorts of things were not going well. And they said to God one night, the God who they didn't believe in, God tell me that I am going to be alright, and I want it in writing. And the next morning, they caught a woman they knew pushing a letter through their letter box, and in the letter the person said "God I think is telling me that you are going to be okay, he has heard you."

God has got you - that makes such a difference.

And I think that you are encouraged to ask for this, in whatever form is going to make sense to you. That you are going to believe.

And then here is the next part.

The angel says, "You are going to become pregnant with a son, and the most high will be with him, and he will be on the throne of David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever." That is quite the thing. Actually I think we miss how much the "throne of David" counts for a lot. This is David's throne which there was a promise about, and the promise does not seem to have been kept, and now it is going to be kept.

And then Mary says a most surprising thing "How can this be, because I have not yet known a man."

Now this is surprising, because Mary is about to get married, and she knows that in a few months' time this is going to be perfectly possible. But because she has this gift of spiritual intuition, she knows that this is going to happen in a weird away - weird in the old sense of the world, which means out of the ordinary. She has this deep sense of intuition, that God is going to do something strange, out of the ordinary.

The angel says "The holy Spirit will overshadow you".... This speaks to a deep sense of awesomeness. I recently saw a young woman overshadowed with a sense of Spirit, as she pondered ... it was awesome to see, and also you realised that she needed to be alone with the intensity of her thoughts - that is what happened I think when Mary took on into her womb, the body of the Christ who already created and soaked the world with his presence.

And then Mary goes to her relative Elizabeth,

And Elizabeth recognises what is happening within her,

And the child rejoices

And she rejoices - blessed are you among woman and blessed is the fruit if your womb.  
And they spend three months together, in other words just about until she gives birth.

It is here that Mary sings her song, that is one of the most political songs in the whole of the Bible. She is now societal conservative - if she had got to that verse in All things bright and beautiful - the rich man in his castle, the poor man at the gate, God made them high or lowly, And ordered their estate.

And she talks about a society being subverted.

There are a few things to ponder here, about growth and personal growth.

The first is that faith is a place of individual and corporate calling where God does unique things with ordinary lives.

I have spoken about this a lot, but one of the biggest problems for Churches like ours is that we do not take the individual calling seriously enough, we do not take our journeys seriously enough, and I want to ask - where have you been called.

Elizabeth Gilbert tells the story of a friend of hers who was researching women who had careers which flew high, and she asked them how they had done this - and they said the same truths about having to be twice as good as men to get recognised, and of needing to put up with a lot of nonsense, but then they would always ask the woman to switch off the recorder and say "Do you want to hear the real reason?" - a voice told me.

This is the story of Mary saying yes to the voice.

I am the servant of the Lord she says.

Yes - thought I have to think a lot about this,

Yes - thought I am going to have to go through an experience that no-one else will understand

Yes - though I am disturbed.

Yes - because I am blessed, most blessed.

It is a story about the call and having the courage to say yes.

And it is a story about finding the person who can be alongside you in that call, the person who gets it, because their calling is not so very different; go and make the journey to be with that person.

And finally this is the story which sees the implications - that Jesus is going to upset everything.

God seems to say that when he gives us a vision that is going to upset me

It's also going to upset other people - that is scary

But that is what God does.

Ultimately it leads us all to the path where we are brought into the kingdom, the banquet table where all belong - where the proud are brought lower and the humble are lifted up.

This is what the story is about... this radical - inclusive, totally changing community.

This is what we are called to

Let us hear the voice

Let us ponder it and be astonished at it

Let us say "yes" to God.

AMEN