

Jane Ward-Hall Sunday 18th December 2011

3rd Sunday in Advent

Luke 1;26-

38

One week until Christmas day when we celebrate again the birth of Jesus, that amazing day when the Son of God, King of the universe, came to live a human life on earth with us. I wonder how you are all feeling? If you're anything like me, it will be a mixture of feelings. I'm really looking forward to my first Christmas as Mrs Ward-Hall, seeing friends and family, coming to church, but all the supermarket queues and washing up grungy roasting tins I'm not so sure about!

This morning we are going back in time to think about the crucial events that lead up to the birth of Jesus. The birth of any baby is an amazing miracle, and even today births are often not straightforward but how were things in 9 months BC. Our reading from Luke tells us of Mary's encounter with an angel. This passage is often described as the annunciation. Which means an announcement. An announcement by an angel no less, who tells Mary and us that Jesus will be born a holy child because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

The challenge of writing sermons is how to make the bible passage relevant to and able to be applied to the lives of the congregation. At first this seems a tricky ask for a passage of scripture as important as this. Mary was a saint, Jesus can only be born once, it's historically a vital story, so lets see how I do.

What do we think of when we think of Mary? Charming nativity plays, statues in Churches? But Mary didn't start off a saint. In reality she was an ordinary Jewish teenage girl who said yes to God. Her willingness to accept God's plan for her life (being the mother of Jesus) made all the difference and the key point I want to make this morning is that though we are not Mary, God has plans for us too and our willingness to allow God to use us can make all the difference!

The day an angel appeared to a teenage girl called Mary she probably thought I'm an ordinary girl just getting on with chores for my mother. Maybe she was dreaming of the day she would be married to Joseph. One minute everything normal and the next pow everything changes! An angel appears, she's terrified; he tells her extraordinary news that she is favoured by God, that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and she will give birth to a holy child named Jesus, who will be called Son of the most High. He will reign forever and of His kingdom there will be no end.

On this day Mary says yes to God and the history of the world changes. The birth of Jesus, God himself living as a human being is the most significant event in history. God uses ordinary people in extraordinary ways, yes he can even use people like you and me. When we try in our feeble, fumbling way to follow Jesus we enter into something so much bigger and beyond ourselves. It's as if our willingness allows God to draw us into his plans.

Our reading begins “in the 6th month” now this has always confused me because to me the 6th month is June and Jesus was born in December? But it is linking the conception of Jesus with the previous story in Luke - the 6th month refers to the 6th month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, who was barren and way past child bearing age when an angel appeared to her husband, Zechariah. He is told that his wife would have a son but unlike Mary he didn't believe the angel and as a result was struck dumb until after the baby is born and he shows his belief by writing “His name is John” and his speech returns.

This story should cause us to think of another elderly, barren couple way back in Genesis, Abraham and Sarah . This is the way the bible works; it is full of repeating patterns and it's so exciting. Matthew's gospel, the only other one to tell of the birth of Jesus, refers to Abraham as the start of the family line from whom Jesus is descended.

All the names are in Matthew Chap 1. There are 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to the exile to Babylon and 14 further generations from the return from exile to the birth of Jesus. That's 42 generations in all. God's plans are amazing in their precision and detail and He's not in a rush! Promises God made in the past can be relied upon to come to fruition in the future.

If we only had Mark's or John's gospel we might assume that Jesus descended as he ascended, just appeared from the clouds in adult form. But no, Matthew and Luke give us a lot of detail. Matthew tells the story from Joseph's point of view and Luke from Mary's. Luke being a Doctor and a scientist is very keen on detail. If it was the present day I'm sure he would have included an ultrasound picture! The focus of Luke's gospel is the humanity of Jesus. He wants us to see the way God intertwines the natural and supernatural.

Jesus' conception was supernatural but his development in Mary's womb and his birth was natural. Why? Again it shows that God chooses to involve ordinary human beings to be used in the fulfilment of His purposes. And just like Mary, we too can choose to be used by God. This is an amazing truth. It gives us hope. Hope that our lives have eternal purpose that can only come from following Jesus.

I've had a truly amazing year. Engaged, married, moved house, my daughter's wedding and that was only the first 7 months! I'm only just settling down and now we've got the builders in and I don't like it! I don't like the noise, the disruption and especially the dust! But I have realised that I don't like something else. The night before they were due to start I felt so anxious, I hardly slept; I wondered why. Analyse, analyse, its what processors like me do! I concluded my anxiety came down to a lack of control- I didn't know the builders, I don't know anything about plumbing and electrics but if I wanted these home improvements I would have to trust them- let go of my desire to control and accept I was in their hands.

If I'm only interested in pleasing Jane and if protecting myself from anxiety and fear is to be the goal of my life then I won't get much done! I certainly wouldn't get the opportunity to enjoy a new bathroom. But can I also equate the same principle to the things of God? Who do we want to please?

In every situation that happens to us we can think about it in 2 basic ways. How it will or is affecting me personally or by stepping back, how does this event fit into the bigger picture? When I apply this to my dealings with God I think I get caught up in a false belief that if God's involved things will be easy; there will be no problems and I'll have a sense of perfect peace.

The story of Mary's meeting with the angel Gabriel shows us that even in this most crucial event in history this isn't the case. Mary chooses to override her shock and fear and believe the bigger picture, God's version of the story. The reading tells us she was afraid, she could have allowed her fear and thoughts like "my reputation will be ruined if I become pregnant before Joseph and I are married. My parents will be so upset. No one will ever believe that Joseph and I haven't had sex".

But her knowledge of scripture enables her to know that where God is involved he will help her overcome whatever problems she might encounter along the way. Mary believes God is trustworthy. She wants to please God. She believes the angel's words that "nothing is impossible for God". And this enables her to override her fear and say "Here I am the servant of the Lord let it be to me according to your word".

Are you struggling with something in your life? A decision you are trying to make, a commitment you are finding difficult to live out. This might be something major like a house, or job move, a health issue, your child's school, or how to deal with a situation where someone has hurt you. Your church involvement. Have you tried praying to ask God to show you the big picture here? What are His purposes in your situation? How can your decision be part of His plan for your life?

Break through comes when our desire to please God becomes greater than our desire to please others or ourselves. For this to happen we need the help of the Holy Spirit. Ordinary Mary was used by God in an extraordinary way. When we try to follow Jesus, and are willing to be used by God, God can and will use us, and our lives can become extraordinary too!