

A Character not A Caricature!

Isaiah 61^{10-end}; Psalm 45^{10-end}; Galatians 4⁴⁻⁷; Luke 1⁴⁶⁻⁵⁵

*My soul magnifies the Lord.
[Luke 1⁴⁶]*

Greetings from St Mary's in Handsworth – we share the same dedication and the same mission in the same city, but in very different settings within the same City!

It is never easy to preach on any of the Marian Festivals as the only sermon that ever seems to be preached is the very valid encouragement that we, following the example of Our Lady, say 'YES' to God! What *can* be said to inform, encourage and challenge the faithful in the life and ministry of this Church, dedicated to Our Lady?

I confess that, of late, I have been trying to engage with the Bible by trying to 'get into the shoes' of the various characters that we meet there. So, for today, I have been trying to get 'into the shoes of Mary' to see what she may be able to teach us about our life here today (with apologies to any very orthodox amongst us).

- ✘ What do we know about Mary's childhood? Nothing! But we will know that, following the traditions of the time, she will have known from her earliest years who she would marry because their families would have arranged it. She was betrothed as a pre-pubescent ready for her to marry when there was evidence that she had become a woman. That's what Mary would have known, expected and been prepared for, as would have been the case for every young girl at that time.
- ✘ Gabriel appearing was a shock for her (and for Joseph)! She may have begun with a very joyful 'Tell out my Soul', but by 8 ½ months and a journey to Bethlehem to be with his family (as the Romans only needed census details from property owners to tax them) and even then not being senior enough to get to the guest room (*καταλυμαι*), that will have become more 'Drop, dop, slow tears' than 'Shine, Jesus, shine!' Yet, Jesus is born and visited by shepherds and eventually by the Magi: all fascinating and inspiring.

- ✘ What of family life in Egypt and then Nazareth? Again, we have very little to go on. What we do know is that Mary and Joseph between them brought up confident and strong adults: just read Jesus' half-brother, James's, Epistle if you doubt that! Or, the mob-handed approach when they went to rescue Jesus from himself and he is rude to them and says his mother and brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God. Did Mary have to tell Jesus off? Yes! Certainly, after his Bar mitzvah visit to Jerusalem. She didn't do this because Jesus was sinful, but because she was. Yet, Mary was faithful to Jesus through his ministry, even when Jesus sent her away, and was there at the crucifixion as well as continuing with the Apostles. Then silence.

What we have is a character and not a caricature. We honour – without worshipping - Mary as the Virgin Mother of God (*πρωτοτοκος*) but know that our life is derived from God in Christ, however good or fallible an example of discipleship she may be.

Our task, then, is to live as real characters and not as caricatures as we seek to minister where God has placed us.

- ✘ It is looking for a response to God that has integrity. One of the worrying things is that Church seems to believe that people have to be converted to be like them rather than being converted to be like Christ. That is our mission and everything else must be subservient to that.
- ✘ It is looking for those who are able to follow Mary's example in letting go and that have the ability to change (as she must when Jesus became a man and then when he followed his destiny and arrived at his execution before the resurrection) and to respond to what God demands at any time. What will St Mary's Moseley look like in 10, 20, 50 or a 100 years time? How willing are you to shape that by being reshaped yourself?

God calls us to a confidence and commitment in the Parish Church (not shared by the National Leadership, it would appear) and the imagination and creativity of getting into the shoes of those who aren't here – yet! To discern what will draw them to encounter Christ and be enabled to worship and act to build the plausibility that makes that possible.

The ducks?