

Celebrating the Blessed Virgin Mary

A sermon on Luke 1:46-55 by Canon Simon Everett

Sunday 15th August 2021

*Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power,
the glory, the splendour and the majesty;
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours.
All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.*

It's all right, I'm not having a senior moment and getting the liturgy and sermon mixed up! But when was the last time you spontaneously broke out into a song of praise overwhelmed by the sheer majesty and almighty greatness of God? It doesn't happen all that often to me but when it does it most likely comes out of the blue when I least expect it.

As I say my prayers each day, I am constantly aware of the privilege I have at being able to stand in the presence of God and commune with him, through his Son Jesus. And as I read my Bible I will often discover new things about God and myself, as the Holy Spirit brings God's word to life; and my heart thrills at coming to church to join with all of you in worshipping the Almighty: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And I hope that it is the same for you.

But when was the last time it went beyond this and you found yourself lifted to a higher plain, totally awestruck? When these moments come there are, I would say, two common reactions. First, as with many of Biblical characters there is an overwhelming sense of unworthiness at being in the presence of the Almighty and so they throw themselves to the floor, completely overcome by the fear of the Lord. (Like Ezekiel and Daniel and Simon Peter...)

The other reaction is to break into a spontaneous song of praise, such as I said at the beginning of my sermon. A song composed by King David nearly 3,000 years ago, when he was overcome by the generosity of the people's giving towards the Temple, which Solomon would build (1 Chronicles 29). Of course, we say it week by week as the elements are brought to the Communion table – our humble offerings of bread and wine, brought to be blessed and made holy, that we may receive the body and blood of Christ in the blessed sacrament.

It is a song that talks of the greatness of God, acknowledging his reign over all that is. The thing that we often forget, or conveniently overlook, is that all things belong to him – everything – including our very selves. All that we possess and all that we are is ultimately the Lord's and so not only do we offer bread and wine and our financial contribution to the parish, we also offer ourselves in his service. *'...All things come from you O Lord, and of your own do we give you.'* As Jesus was to say, it is only in losing our lives to him, (give ourselves to him) that we receive true life in all its fullness.

And on this our patronal festival, we can take Mary our as great example in this matter. Mary gave her all to God, as we hear earlier in Luke's Gospel, when speaking to the angel Gabriel, *"I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said."* (Lk 1:38)

The more I think about what Mary did, the more I stand in awe of her, for her courage and faith. She was probably no more than a teenage girl and yet asked to bear the Son of God, no wonder her cousin Elizabeth told her that she was blessed among all women. (v42). This young girl gave her life to God, for that is what it would take to bear the Son of God.

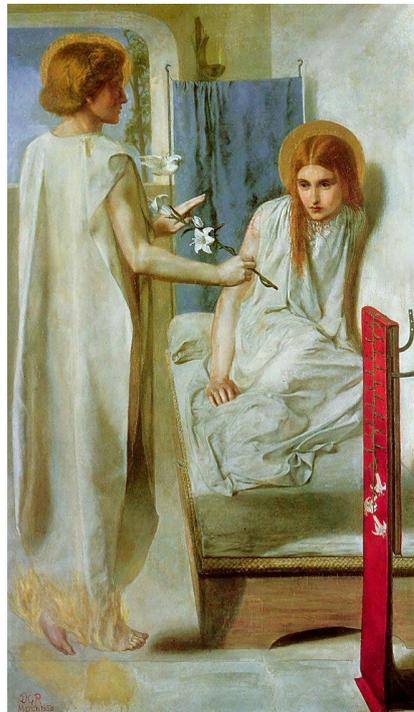
I cannot begin to imagine what must have gone through her mind as she contemplated what was being asked of her. Often the Virgin Mary is depicted as this serene, beatific figure, somehow aloof from the rest of humanity. But in truth she would have been just as we are with all our fears and anxieties at facing a daunting future.

One of my favourite picture is this painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Ecce Ancilla Domini', 'Behold the Handmaid of the Lord'. At the time it was a very controversial picture as it portrays Mary in a very different light to the frequent 'holier than thou' portrayals of Mary in much Byzantine and Renaissance art.

For me it captures the sheer holy terror of encountering the angel of the Lord and the enormity of what was being asked of her. This is contrasted with the peace of the angel bearing the lily as a sign of purity, accompanied by the dove (having just flown through the window?), hovering just above the lily, almost appearing as an extra bud. The dove signifying the Holy Spirit by whom she would be with child. The lily points to the virgin's womb and then through the fold in her gown on to the bright red embroidery, signifying the blood of the Son she is to bear, shed to atone for the sins of the world. What a calling. What a remarkable girl.

Mary gave her all to God:

- her body to bear the Christ-child.
- Her reputation, knowing that a young girl getting pregnant would cause tongues to wag, with speculation as to who the father was.
- She gave her future knowing that life could never be the same again after this encounter.



She stepped out in faith knowing the precious child she was to bear would never be wholly her own – he was for all people of every generation. Jesus, a Greek form of the Jewish name Joshua, which means 'the Lord saves'. And yet, she consented to the angel's request, mystified as to how she could possibly bear a child, since she had not known a man (as the Old translation puts it rather quaintly). But the angel reassures her, 'with God all things are possible.'

Now contrast this terror, or maybe I should say overwhelming fear of the Lord, with the song of praise she is able to utter when she meets with her cousin Elizabeth a little while later.

'My soul doth magnify the Lord.' Or, *'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.'*

Mary's song challenges us to live out our lives to God's glory, which sounds wonderful. Of course, we all want to experience more of that and hopefully shine as lights in a dark world. I am sure we would all like to experience the overwhelming presence of God and burst forth in spontaneous praise. **But be careful what you wish for!** For invariable it is those who have the greatest and most intimate encounters with God who are called to the most demanding tasks. Just think of Mary, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, in fact most of the OT prophets; the Apostles and the saints down through the ages.

We are all called to play our part, each and every one of us, and in our daily prayers we should all ask what more we can do. Here in the UK, over the past decades our society has gradually (and then not so gradually) slipped into spiritual poverty. It has turned its back on God and his ways, forging ahead trusting its own philosophies and ideologies. How long will it be before it recognises it is speeding down a blind alley, about to hit a brick wall? We, the Church, need to speak with a prophetic voice, as Mary did as her praise turned to prophecy and she proclaimed:

God... 'has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,' (as now he helps His Church)

'remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever..' (That's you and me!)

On this day we celebrate the Blessed Virgin Mary, let us ask God what it is he wants of us, for as Jesus said, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few...'. We are those labourers. May the Lord use us greatly in his service, following the example of the obedience of Mary.

Questions

1. What do you think is meant by Mary being blessed among all women (Lk 1:42, 48)? And how should we express this?
2. What would you say to those who might say, Mary is over celebrated in the 'Catholic' churches and undercelebrated in the Protestant churches?
3. I suggest there are two common ways in which people react following an encounter with the Lord, or being awestruck; can you think of other examples and other reactions?
4. Do you regard the offertory prayer said at the opening of the sermon as a prayer offering yourself to God and His service? '*...All things come from you O Lord, and of your own do we give you.*'
5. Is it helpful having a piece of art to illustrate points made in the sermon?
6. Do you agree that we are a spiritually poverty stricken nation? Have we lost the prophetic voice of Mary in the Magnificat; making it too commonplace (sung at Evensong and said at Evening Prayer)? What should we do to reclaim this?
7. Did you know that the Magnificat was banned from public worship in some countries (see opening paragraph on the weekly newsletter).