

Last week we started on the first of the journeys to the manger, examining Zechariah's journey, chosen from one among thousands of priests to perform prayers in the Holy Place in the Temple, and from being "child-less" well into his old age, to becoming a father. God has patience with doubters, but God **WILL** accomplish what God sets out to do, with or without our understanding of His greater plan, and if necessary, without our agreement.

Today, we shall look at the life of Mary, focusing on her journey **to** the manger.

One of the busiest persons at this time is the angel Gabriel. Only two angels are named in the Bible: Gabriel and Michael. Gabriel is not an **archangel**, but Michael is¹. We first meet Gabriel by name in the book of Daniel². Daniel has a complex vision about a ram and a goat and their horns³ which he has difficulty understanding. He hears a voice telling someone "who looked like a man", *Gabriel! Explain the vision to this man!*⁴

Having delivered his message to Zechariah, Gabriel was dispatched once again, this time to the province Galilee, to a town called Nazareth, with an even more awesome message.

On the cross roads of caravan routes, Roman soldiers, pilgrims and merchants influenced Nazareth's native culture; corruption and immorality had become commonplace in the life of the city. Nazareth's reputation was so tarnished, when Jesus' disciple Nathaniel was told it was Jesus' hometown, his spontaneous response was, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"⁵

¹ Jude 9

² early 600 BC

³ Daniel 8

⁴ Daniel 8:16

⁵ John 1:46

Yet, God chose Nazareth, and he chose the Galilean home of an ordinary family. Luke's genealogy of Jesus⁶ tells us, Mary is a direct descendant of King David through his son Nathan⁷, and at the time of her encounter with the Angel Gabriel, she was engaged to be married to Joseph, a carpenter and stone mason by trade.⁸

Marriages in Hebrew society are different from our customs in western society today.

Usually the local matchmaker, with parental consent, would introduce a young couple to each other. If the couple agreed, a formal engagement ceremony took place, which was a solemn undertaking to marriage, consecrated before a priest, and was so binding, only a formal divorce was necessary to break it.

The couple, however, did not live together, until the groom's father, gave an assurance to the bride's father, that his son had built a house fit to be the couple's home. The language of the groom's father is to assure the bride's father, his beloved daughter would live as comfortably, if not more comfortably than she did in her father's house. Only then would the bridegroom process to the bride's home and take her back to the home he prepared for them.

Matthew tells us, Joseph and Mary were in this in-between stage, engaged but not living together, which might help you appreciate the seriousness of the problem facing them both.⁹

God now dispatches Gabriel, this time with the most important message **ever** conveyed.

⁶ Luke 3

⁷ Luke 3:31

⁸ Matthew 1:18

⁹ Matthew 1:18ff

I think, Gabriel was nervous. Not only was the young lady facing him, far too young to be the mother of God's Only Son, but she radiated a character not often seen in the human race. Gabriel's greeting gives it away. *"Hail, O favoured one, the Lord, Almighty and Eternal is with you!"*.

Please note, Gabriel greeted Zechariah by name, *Do not be afraid Zechariah*¹⁰, but he does not greet Mary by name. If God deems this young girl fit to be the mother of His Only Son, Gabriel's response is **not** *"Who am I to question God?"*. Gabriel's response is in the tone of, *If God has chosen her for this most important role, I must give her utmost respect. i.e. I must respect God's choice.*

Aren't we are often guilty of this, that we do not respect God's choice of person in a role? Let's not narrow our answer to only missionaries and ministers, but but significantly, look to the person sitting next to us, or living next or near us, the whom God has called and given a specific role and responsibilities. One commandment Jesus said, overruled all other commandments. When asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus replied, *Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul and mind, **and love your neighbour as yourself***, which is to give your neighbour the respect, reverence and esteem with which God treats them. Very often, we see the failings in our neighbour, and question God's decision for putting them on earth. *Did God make a mistake?*, is to question God's decision! Gabriel, who stands always in the presence of God, knows better than to question God. And He knows very well, whom God has chosen, He must respect.

Luke says, *Mary was greatly troubled by the words of Gabriel's greeting, and tried to discern, what sort of greeting this might be!* Unlike Zechariah who feared the angel Gabriel, Mary is troubled by the greeting. Perhaps, no has ever told her, *You have such a lovely demeanour and personality Mary,*

¹⁰ Luke 1:13

God's character shows through you. Perhaps no one has ever shown her as much respect, as **not** to greet her by name.

Gabriel gets a grip on himself; he has come to deliver a message. He clears his throat and delivers the message God has sent him to deliver, starting with his classic opening line, *Do not be afraid Mary* (he now addresses her by name), *for you have found favour with God.*

As a society who lived the Word of God, the word of prophets was at the centre of their lives. Over a thousand years, young girls expecting their first child would have harboured the thought, *would I be the one through whom God would deliver His Son, the Messiah?* Mary is "The Favoured One"!

Gabriel tells her **three** things that will happen to her: she will conceive a child, she will give birth to the child, and she will name Him Jesus, the same message confirmed to Joseph by the angel, who though not named in the Matthew's account, we might believe to be Gabriel.

Gabriel also tells Mary **five** things about the Son she will bring into this world: He will be great, called the Son of the Most High, God will give Him the throne of King David (which made sense to Mary as she is in his direct descendant line), He will rule of the house of Jacob (who was re-named *Israel*), and of His kingdom there will be no end, He will rule in eternity for eternity.

Mary has the assurance she needs. Zechariah doubted the messenger from God (*Gabriel*), Mary doubts neither the message nor the messenger.

Her reply, *How will this be, since I am a virgin?*", is best understood through Gabriel's reply, *The Holy Spirit will overshadow you...* Mary was not doubting God's ability; she was asking, *How will God do this, as have not yet been with my husband?*

It is true isn't it, we have a tendency to hear and understand God, through the filter of our own inadequate knowledge and incomplete

understanding; human intelligence fails us when considering the endless possibilities at God's disposal.

Mary was not doubting God's ability to do what He declared; Mary was using human intelligence to weigh God's action - *If I have never been with a man, how will (not, **can**) God ensure I will conceive and deliver this child?*

Gabriel's offers a three-fold reply. First, this is how God will help you conceive; then, as if he needed to further explain and provide proof of God doing the impossible, he tells Mary of the news cousin Elisabeth received six months earlier. And finally, Gabriel offers a declaration borne out of the experience of eternity with God, *"For with God, nothing is ever impossible, and no word from God shall be without power, or impossible of fulfilment."*¹¹ God's spoken word is His creative power, as it was when He created the world, so it will be now.

I sense Mary paused before her final reply to let Gabriel's incredible message, sink in.

What would happen if she submitted to God's will for her life? As a pregnant, unmarried teenager, how will her family, friends and community respond? The punishment under the law for adultery and infidelity was death by stoning¹². Her life would change completely if she submitted to God's plan, not only for her life, but for the entire world! Would it be a sacrifice too far? The words, *"For with God, nothing is ever impossible"* would have echoed through her mind, finally drowning out the many questions starting with, *What if...?* and *What will...?*

Gabriel waited. She mustn't see him trembling with anxiety and concern; to think that the entire future of all creation and the human race, now hung on the answer of this young teenage girl.

¹¹ Luke 1:37 (AMPC)

¹² Deuteronomy 22

Finally, the young Galilean teenager responds with an act of obedient submission, of surrender to the will of God. It would not have been easy as we might be tempted to think, but the words come out with quiet confidence, in keeping with her character, *"I am the servant of the Lord, God Eternal; may it happen to me as you have said."* There is no spiritual rush, no emotional ecstasy because she is in the presence of an angel; only a thoughtful, obedient response to God's revelation through Gabriel. Mary believed God, in single-minded, unwavering commitment.

One of the things we must learn in our journey as a follower of Christ is, not to rush, nor try to unravel and understand *mystery*.

We have been confronted in this passage, with God who takes insignificant places, insignificant people, and graces them with His blessing, with His usefulness.

Do you feel insignificant? Do you wonder if God can use you, if anybody even knows who you are? The truth of this revelation is: there are no insignificant people. God is looking for obedient, not important people. He will take your life and use it for his purpose as he did with Zechariah and Elizabeth, and as he did with Mary.

We have been confronted with God who delighted in the obedient submission of his daughter, Mary; We are presented with God who calls us to take him at his word, with the same radical submission--ready to submit in faith--to the wonder God has in store for us and our place in that wonder. Do not miss the thrill of the journey!

AMEN

PRAYER: *Our Father! We stand are speechless before you. Our hearts have been challenged, convicted, even shocked. We struggle with this word. Can it mean what it says? Thank you for your self-revelation. We ask you to minister to each of us at the specific point of need in our lives. Take these words through the power of your Spirit and burn them into each of our hearts. Prepare us during this season of Advent, to accept your mystery, to welcome your affirmation, and to celebrate and rejoice, with hearts and minds that are ready for your revelation. We ask all of these things because of Jesus, and in His name. **Amen.***