

Dcn. Ish Sermon for Mattins Sunday 20 December 2009

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

1. How do we picture God?

Of course it is impossible for our finite minds to picture His greatness and vastness.

For some, to understand Him, they have to see Him as a very superior human, others think Him as so immense, they cannot picture Him at all.

One thing must be true though.

For God to be God He must have all knowledge. He must contain the ability to know everything that was, that is, and that will be.

Little 9 year old Marie could not quite understand this and asked her Vicar the following question:

'God might know everything, but how does God know the good people from the bad people? Do you tell Him, or does He read about it in the newspapers?'

Now is not the time, to get into a debate on inherent or total omniscience, and certainly not predestination. But both the Old Testament and the New Testament are full of verses that confirm God's omniscience. For example, the Psalmist in Psalm 147 writes: *'God's understanding is beyond measure.'* Whilst St. John in his Epistle, reminds us that: *'God knows everything.'*

2. We worship a God who makes plans.

Being God, He must have known from the beginning, that man, His created masterpiece, would rebel against Him.

Being God, He must have known from the beginning, that there would come a time when He would need to send His Son down to earth, as mankind's saviour.

Being God, He must have known from the beginning of time, what year, what day, what hour, what minute that would be.

Being God, He also must have known from the beginning of time, that a young teenage virgin called Mary, would be the one to give birth to His Son.

In fact, according to the genealogy in Luke 3, God had already planned the family line, beginning with His son Adam.

God's plan for redemption was set, but He did not want it to be a secret plan.

Over 700 years before God's ultimate plan would be fulfilled, He broke the news to Isaiah. *'Let my people know,'* said God, *'A virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son and will call Him Immanuel.'*

Then God gave out another reminder, through His prophet Micah. *'A promised ruler will come from Bethlehem. Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour gives birth.'*

3. The years role on.

And then at last the day of fulfilment came very close.

Now even the Christmas story does not really start with just Mary and Joseph. We must remember that the custom of the day for the Jews was arranged marriages.

It is very likely that whilst Mary was still a child, and we presume Joseph was older, that Joseph's father would have been on the lookout for a suitable wife for his son.

God of course had planned that Joseph's father would at some stage meet up with Mary's father (sorry if this sounds a bit like back to the future).

Obviously Joseph's father appreciated what he saw in this family and thought that in a few years time little Mary would make an ideal wife for his son Joseph.

The two fathers would have then formed a contract together, which was called an engagement, even though most times the engaged couple had never seen each other.

A marriage in those days was far too serious to be left to the heart or for two people to fall in love.

When Mary reached her teenage years she would have the option to back out, but of course by doing this, would bring disgrace to her father and family.

Mary agreed to marry Joseph and her engagement now became a betrothal. The betrothal was a binding contract for both her and Joseph and the only way out of this was divorce.

The betrothal lasted a year and of course it was a chance for the couple to get to know each other but there would definitely be no sexual relationship during this time.

At the end of the year came the marriage celebration.

4. So again we see Gods amazing plan unfolding.

Then the story becomes very personal and we begin to see what an amazing person Mary was.

Here she was a young teenager who has honoured her father's wishes and was in her betrothal year, after agreeing to marry an older man, that she hardly knew.

This of course was nothing unusual but then came the shocking part of God's plan.

Out of the blue the angel Gabriel appeared and told her, *'Don't be afraid, God thinks you're special. You will become pregnant and give birth to His Son'*.

Understandably she is completely fazed by this revelation and her response is a very human one: *'How can this happen when I have not had sex with anyone?'*

Then the angel explains how this will happen in a miraculous way.

5. At the end of the angel's explanation.

As strange as it may seem, momentarily, the divine plan of redemption of mankind waited upon the consent of this little Jewish girl.

Mary replies, *'I am the Lords servant may it be to me as you have said'*. You can almost hear Gabriel breath a sigh of relief.

Mary's statement was not just a yes, ok if I must.

It was an Amen! Joyful excitement! Be it done to me! I am ready!

The angel left and it was all systems go for God's plan immediately to be put into action.

But let's try and imagine what must be going through this young girl's mind even in her excitement.

'What will my parents think? What will Joseph's parents think? And of course what will Joseph my husband to be, who I hardly know, think?'

Then of course, thanks to the law in Deuteronomy. *'If this goes wrong, I could end up getting stoned to death'*.

Then because she was a young virgin, the physical side of things must have entered her mind. *'How will the Holy Spirit make me pregnant? What will I have to do? Maybe even will it be painful'*.

And of course there was no one on earth who could answer these questions for her.

Nine months later, what God had planned since the beginning, was fulfilled in a humble stable.

It's not surprising that all heaven went crazy, as the angel shared the good news with the shepherds, that Jesus was born. They had waited it seemed as if forever for this day to come.

6. Now for me.

Being ordained, and part of the Cathedral clergy, has been and is still being, a massive learning curve.

Before my Anglican conversion a few years ago, most of you know I have spent most of my time being a leader in various very free, very Pentecostal, very evangelical churches.

One of the biggest challenges has been to get my head around the role of Mary.

In my previous Church, Mary was never referred to as, 'The Queen of Heaven', or given more credibility other than being the obedient Mother of Jesus.

7. Now having visited Walsingham.

And having discussed this subject with some of my very Catholic clergy friends, they were shocked to hear that other Christians cannot hail her as being, '*Full of grace*', or maybe even see her as, '*The Gate of Heaven.*'

So far on my journey of a Biblical discovery of Mary, I think she was a most amazing lady, who deserves to be honoured and respected, far more than I used to honour and respect her.

In my personal opinion, to say she was sinless or to raise her to the position of an additional, slightly inferior, member of The Holy Trinity, actually takes away from the amazing person she was.

Mary, Mary, opinions vary,
As to if you're Heaven's Queen?
Some say forever
Some say never
Some say you're in between.

Mary, Mary, opinions vary,
But the Bible's keen to record.
You're favoured and blessed
Different from the rest
You're the mother of Jesus our Lord.

