

## **Mary – her humility, her obedience, and Bible knowledge**

Mary was just an ordinary village girl, maybe still in her teens. She had kept herself pure, but no doubt many others had also done so.

There is no evidence that there had been anything special about Mary's own birth, as Roman Catholics have since invented, with their unnecessary doctrine of her own Immaculate Conception. But God chose Mary.

God is in the business of choosing. He planned you and me; and he made us. He can choose us for whatever he wishes us to do. He chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, who was himself to be her Messiah, and her Saviour.

Let us first notice her humility.

In verse 29 from our second (gospel) reading we heard that Mary was "greatly troubled" at the angel Gabriel's words "Greetings, you are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." (Lk. 1.28). Mary had not been seeking the limelight. She had just been living an ordinary quiet life in her village, Nazareth, as she said later in her song "For he (God) has been mindful of the humble state of his servant". (Lk 1.48)

Look at what the angel said about her son, Jesus. The Most High is a name for God, as Mary would probably have known; Gabriel said about her son "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end." (1.32-33) Her son would indeed be the long-awaited Messiah.

And then hear what the angel went on to say about how she would conceive, and more about her son: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (1.35)

That conception would be a problem for Mary, as we shall see later, but although she must have reflected on those messages frequently, in the days and months and years to come, she remained humble.

Her song - the Magnificat we call it, after its opening word in Latin, Magnificat, magnify - her song is full of the Lord, and of what he had done for her. "He has been mindful ... The mighty one has done great things ... His mercy extends ... He has performed ... He has scattered ... He has brought down ... He has lifted up ... He has filled ... He has helped... (1.48-55). She said that these things God had done.

And there is nothing later in the Gospels or in the Acts of the Apostles to show that being Jesus's mother made Mary proud, or seeking honour for herself. Indeed after Jesus became an adult Mary is only occasionally mentioned in the New Testament, and she disappears from view completely after Acts chapter 1, in which she is mentioned as meeting for prayer with the Apostles and others, after Jesus' ascension and before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

I think she would be horrified to know how some people today call her 'Our Lady' in contrast to calling Jesus 'Our Lord', or how some call her 'the Queen of Heaven' or 'the Mother of God'.

And even more horrified if she knew that some people worship images of her, or dolls representing her.

Rather than boast, the Bible tells us that after the shepherds' visit to Bethlehem "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (2.19).

Then again, after Jesus aged 12, had stayed behind in the temple talking with the teachers there, Luke writes "His mother treasured all these things in her heart" (2.51b).

No doubt she told these events later to Luke, when he was researching Jesus's life for his gospel.

Mary remained humble: the Lord's choice of her did not go to her head. Praise God.

It is right for us to be humble. Whatever we may achieve we achieve through God's help: he made us, he sustains us, he guides us, he chooses us for tasks, he gives us his gifts and his grace to do them. It is him at work, through us.

As the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians "What do you have that you did not receive?" - 1 Corinthians 4.7

And as the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah "I am the Lord ... I will not give my glory to another" - Isaiah 42.8.

So firstly today notice Mary's humility.

Secondly, let us notice Mary's obedience.

Her answer to the angel Gabriel, and to his message, was "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." (1.38).

The Angel had just told Mary that she was going to be an unmarried mother. What would Joseph, to whom she was engaged to be married, think?

What would her family think?

What would the neighbours think?

What would the local clergy think?

Yet, more important than all that was the fact that God was going to do something very special in her: though she was a virgin, she was going to have a son, through the Holy Spirit's work in her. And her son would be called "The Son of the Most High", and "The Son of God". He would have David's throne and "His kingdom will never end".

Mary obeyed. She believed, as she later sang: God's "mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation" (1.50). God would be merciful to her.

And God took care of the problems.

When Joseph found out that she was pregnant he resolved not to marry her. But Matthew records, in his gospel, that an angel told Joseph that Mary's conception was by the Holy Spirit. So Joseph kept her.

We do not know who else discovered that she was pregnant, but the birth took place at Bethlehem, well away from Joseph and Mary's homes at Nazareth. Shortly after the birth God sent them to Egypt, to get away from Herod.

It was sometime later, after Herod had died, that the angel said they could return from Egypt to Israel, and they returned to Nazareth.

It is right to be obedient to God. We may have to suffer for our obedience. Maybe there will be times when others, even members of our own family, may think us wrong, and make life difficult for us. That happened to me when the Lord called me to the ministry. Or sometimes our obedience may show up others' disobedience, and they do not like that, and they show their displeasure.

If we call God 'Lord', we must obey him as our Lord. The Lord Jesus said to his disciples "If you love me, you will obey what I command" – John 14. 15. In the end God will vindicate us. Through God's grace I have found that to be true. Maybe you have as well.

So we have firstly noticed Mary's humility. We have secondly noticed Mary's obedience. Thirdly, let us notice Mary's Bible knowledge.

Mary did not make up the words of the Magnificat. Yes, she said it. I'm not suggesting that Luke made it up and put it into his gospel as words Mary might have said. She said it. But about 60% of it was what she had learned by heart already. Let's go through it, and see how much of it is in the Old Testament.

"My heart rejoices in the Lord" are words from Hannah's song, our first reading today, recorded in 1 Samuel 2 verse 1.

Mary echoed that, saying "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour". (Lk 1.46b-47).

"The Lord ... looks upon the lowly" – are words from Psalm 138 verse 6.

Mary said something very similar - "For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant". (Lk. 1.48a).

"God (has) done great things" – are words from Psalm 71 verse 19.

Mary said "For the mighty one has done great things for me". (Lk. 1.49a).

"Holy and awesome is his name" are words from Psalm 111 verse 9.

Mary said "Holy is his name". (Lk. 1.49b).

"(God,) ... showing love to a thousand generations of those who love (him)" – is in Exodus 20.6; and Psalm 103 Verse 17 says – "The Lord's love is with those who fear him".

Mary brought those verses together, saying "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation." (Lk. 1.50).

Psalm 98 verse 1 includes – "He (God) has done marvellous things; ... His holy arm has worked salvation for him".

Mary said "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm". (Lk. 1.51a).

Psalm 107 verse 9: "He ... fills the hungry with good things."

Mary said that almost word for word "He has filled the hungry with good things". (Lk.1.53a)

And Psalm 98 verse 3 – "He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel."

Mary said "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful". (Lk. 1.54).

"My heart rejoices in the Lord" were, as I said, the opening words of another young woman's song, about 1000 years before – the song of Hannah, once childless, but now giving her firstborn son Samuel to serve God in his tabernacle. There are other features in common between Mary's song and Hannah's.

But almost all the other lines I have just read were from six of the Psalms – Psalms 71, 98, 103, 107, 111 and 138.

Mary was probably illiterate, like most of her contemporaries. But she had learned at least some psalms by heart. So, no wonder that when she wanted to praise the Lord, the words she knew from the Psalms came tumbling out.

Through her knowledge of the Scriptures she had learned about God, what he is like, and what he had done.

And she would have known the messianic prophecies as well – including the prophecy that the Messiah would be descended from David as she, Mary was, and so her child therefore was descended from David. Indeed the Angel said He would receive the throne of David, reigning over Israel.

No wonder Mary burst out in praise, when she discovered that her cousin Elizabeth had received the same message from God about her.

It is right to be humble.

It is right to be obedient.

And it is also right to know the Bible, God's written word. For in knowing the Bible, through reading it regularly and thoughtfully, and maybe learning verses from it by heart, that we learn more of God, and of how he wishes us to live.

On the table by the door there are some little booklets like this. God's promises in the Bible compiled by my late first wife Jo. They would be a good place to start in learning Bible verses by heart, if you are young enough to do that.

The world counts great those who rise to the top of their profession or their sport, or in entertainment. But all that will all come to an end. As Thomas Gray wrote in his famous Elegy written in a country church-yard –

*"The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour: -  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave."*

God counts great those who may not be thought great by the world, but those who are humble, those who are obedient to him, and those who, through studying his word, grow closer to him, as Mary did.

May we follow in her steps.

Let us pray.