

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke 1.26-38

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

I've lost track of the number of times I have heard Advent described as a journey. A journey along the road to Bethlehem, towards Christmas, a journey of watching, waiting, penitence and prayer. A journey with four leaders - the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist, and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

And Mary herself is the consummate traveller. During her life, she clocks up hundreds of miles, mostly on foot. St Luke tells us that, when three months pregnant, she travels from Nazareth to Jerusalem to meet her cousin Elizabeth.

Then in the company of St Joseph, she makes the famous journey, travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to fulfil her census obligations. And after Jesus' birth, Mary makes the dangerous flight into Egypt to escape King Herod's soldiers who seek to kill all the infant boys - a journey of at least 1600 miles, before the family return home, years later.

By the time Jesus reaches the age of twelve, the family will be on the move again, going the 80 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the festivals, until Jesus decides to stay behind and teach the teachers about God. We know that Mary will repeat the journey at least once more, for she was certainly in Jerusalem again for Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

In those days, whether with a donkey, cart, or shanks' pony for transport - these were impressive feats for a humble young woman from a quiet village in northern Israel. But it is her spiritual journey, Mary's journey with God, that is most powerful - as she is the one who brings us closer than anyone else to God's very own flesh and blood.

Gabriel's speech is the greatest conversation between a human and an angel in the Bible, made more dramatic because it is one of the few occasions when an angel speaks with a woman, and she asks questions. There are parallels with the angel's visit to Sarah, back in the book of Genesis - and the whole new covenant which God made with humanity then.

For all we can celebrate Mary's 'yes' to God, she takes time to consider her answer, and consent. In the times when we face life changing situations, Mary gives us permission to take time and prayer over our decision, and to ask questions of God. For her, it begins a lifetime of highs and lows, joy and pain, humility and excitement.

And after recent months, I suggest that Mary has much to show us about living with God. Often, we talk about going to see someone, going to a special place, going to have a particular experience. In the spiritual life, those who make pilgrimages will journey to somewhere, in the hope of going to meet God in a special way. There is a right and proper place for that.

But if you have made such a journey - it may well have been your travelling companions who had a life changing impact on you. We can think of Mary making the journey to Bethlehem, both overshadowed by God, and being filled by the swelling presence of God within her, as the baby grew... She was not going on a journey to meet God, rather, God travelled with her.

And in later years, as she followed in the crowds who flocked around Jesus as he healed and taught - Mary travels with Him, all the way to the cross. As she learnt of the resurrection and saw her son's ascension into heaven, she played her part in seeing God's love at work in the world, and her faith grew and grew.

When our travel plans have been curtailed, and our ability to go 'to' people has been limited, several people have told me of how their journeys and pilgrimages have become more internal - of learning more about themselves, their closest companions, their immediate surroundings. The journey has become deeper, with attention to detail, and time with God.

As we draw closer to Christmas, Mary invites us to see the spiritual within that journey. To not be afraid when things are unfamiliar and unexpected. To take time to consider how close God is to us, and how we might respond. To be unafraid to ask questions and learn of what plans and blessings God calls us to.

Mary invites us to walk each day in the company of God, finding God within and over us - rather than going to seek God out in a far off place. In a way, life as a Christian involves a bit of both, although neither is an easy path. But as Mary began that journey, unsure of how everything would come out of nothing - Gabriel encourages her - nothing will be impossible with God. The same is true for us today. Amen.