

One of the important areas of ministry within our parish is supporting young people, not to just keep them entertained, but because we long for them to take the baton from us and lead God's church for a new generation. It's interesting when I am with young people how they are influenced by role models. Now it would be great if I thought those role models were people such as me or their parents, but the reality is that 9 times out of 10 our children's' role models are stars from TV or music. It's incredible how much our young people are concerned with popularity, looks, having cool stuff, wearing the "in" clothes, or even having a certain talent. And then the person who was cool and trendy who they looked up to last year is no longer cool anymore. I wonder why our kids' role models can't be an ordinary person, who is extraordinary not because of who they are on the outside but because of who they are on the inside.

Ironically, one of the most iconic women who ever lived in history, is rarely looked upon as a role model. She was not wealthy. She was probably not beautiful, just an ordinary looking girl. She was probably not well educated - she might have even been illiterate. She was unknown outside of her home town during most of her lifetime. Yet she had an inner faith that was close to God's heart! She would become the human mother of the most important person of all times: God's own Son, Jesus. Of course we are talking about Mary, a woman who may never be considered as a role model to our kids, and yet a faithful servant of God.

And so let's consider aspects of her life that we all could do much to model for ourselves :

1. God's favour rests upon those who respond in faith

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he told her she was "highly favoured". What makes you highly favoured by a God who already loves you more than you can imagine? Well I can only assume that Mary, who probably was around 13 or 14 had already exhibited an extraordinary faith in God, and as a result God had chosen her for an amazing task. The more incredible thing however is that God's choosing wasn't based on her position or status. God had chosen someone from a tiny village called Nazareth, in a remote region of the world. "Could anything good come out of Nazareth?", Nathanael would ask. There was nothing spectacular about the surroundings, but clearly there was something spiritually spectacular in Mary's faith and obedience.

You see it doesn't matter how old you are – Mary was in her teens, Abraham was in his 70s before God called him. Neither does it matter where you come from. It doesn't matter how smart you are, or what your family life is. It doesn't matter how much money you make. God is only interested in how much faith we actually have in him. God favours those who believe in what he says will happen, even when they might never see it for themselves – they continue to obey in faith. Remember what Elizabeth said to Mary - blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. God told Mary he was going to do the impossible and Mary believed, she had faith, she trusted God would make her conceive a child even before she saw the evidence of her pregnancy.

So for us today, are we willing to respond in faith, maybe at times when humanly speaking we cannot conceive what God is asking us to be possible? We can be assured that his favour will come on those who walk in faith and not by sight.

2. When we are called by God, we must be willing to endure many things

When the angel Gabriel told Mary she would miraculously bear a child from the Holy Spirit, not only did she believe it would happen, but she also adjusted her life with God's. She responded with a willingness to do whatever God wanted her to do, in this case she accepted the immense responsibility of bearing the one part of the Trinity, raising him in the ways of the Lord. Mary's response was, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you

have said.” Mary didn’t just believe the impossible would happen, that she would be pregnant by the Holy Spirit, she was willing to be a vessel by which God would accomplish his divine plan.

Consider for a moment the ramifications of Mary’s response. By her willingness to serve the Lord:

- Mary was trusting that her soon to be husband, Joseph, would believe her story of the visit from an angel, and of the miraculous pregnancy. She was trusting that Joseph would not seek a divorce, forcing her to raise a child on her own in a society in which illegitimate children were looked upon as second class, and not usually cared for.
- Mary’s response to the Angel meant she was willing to be the gossip of the town because she was pregnant before marriage.

So no matter what way you look at it, it was going to be tough for Mary, but because of her faith in God, she was willing to put her faith in action.

When we are called by God, in faith, it requires a response that is lived out with many possible ramifications. The question is are we willing to consider our faith as more than just a set of beliefs?

Faith acted out comes from an honest desire to serve God. That is the model which Mary and many others have left for us. Are we willing, like Mary, to place everything on the line for our love of God – our reputation, our priorities, our well-being and safety? Being a willing servant will mean sacrifice.

Folks, our faith should affect our head, our heart, AND our hands. Our head - what we believe about God. Our heart - we should have compassion for others in the way that God has compassion for us. And our hands - what are we willing to do for his service.

Would you say you have faith like Mary, who was willing to believe the impossible and step out and trust God? If not, why not? Are we willing to go wherever God asks us? Are we willing to take ridicule for being a follower of Christ? Are we willing to bring dishonour upon ourselves, for doing the right thing?

For our kids and even for us, we need to reconsider who it is that we seek to model after. I pray that this Christmas time, as the writer to the Hebrews, Chapter 12, states we may ‘run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith’