

I cannot count the amounts of times in this past week that I've literally been running into the house, grabbing a bite to eat, before heading straight out again. And like many homes this time of the year, it is very easy to be so tied up in busyness of things that you forget it's meant to be a time to relax, unwind and enjoy time together with those you love.

It was only the other day that I noticed sitting outside the rectory front door, a Christmas wreath lying on the ground. It wasn't that we had forgotten to put it up, it's more that it's for a particular purpose.

You see every Christmas I take a wreath up to my mum's grave, and spend time reflecting on her influence on my life. And actually this year both Alison and I will have wreaths laid on both our mum's graves. As I reflect at how much worry my mum had for me, or how Alison's mum Maureen made such a big thing of Christmas for all of us – giving us all a massive bag full of presents, or Alison who literally thinks of everything for our 2 boys, I realise more and more that dads have it easier. I read this week that it's not easy being a mother, because if it was then fathers would do it.

Our reading today allows us to step into the life of Mary as she thought ahead to motherhood, and all the worries that were on her mind. Not just the normal worries of a mother, but the sheer responsibility of parenting and shaping the son of God. But why was Mary chosen over other women? After all she wasn't that special, she didn't have credentials that seemed suitable for the King of all Kings, or did she?

So today, I want us to briefly look at what we can learn from this faithful servant of God.

Firstly, **MARY TEACHES US IN VERSES 26-27 THAT NO MATTER WHO YOU ARE, GOD CAN USE YOU, IF YOU ARE WILLING AND AVAILABLE.**

Availability is becoming more and more tough in today's jobs that expect you to work night and day for them. Jobs today assume you are always available, and now with home working, it can be hard at times to see when work finishes and family life begins. But as we know with jobs, you're not really asked about your availability – that's assumed once you sign the contract – it's more about your ability. But isn't it incredible that God doesn't operate this way. Mary teaches us that God isn't as interested in your **ABILITY**. He's completely interested in your **AVAILABILITY**. No matter who you are, God can use you!

Verses 26-27 paints a picture of an ordinary girl with some serious liabilities:

She was **YOUNG**. Mary could have been as young as 15 or 16 when Gabriel visited her. You and I might think this girl is too young for God to use her, but apparently God didn't think so. No matter who you are God wants to use you.

She was also **POOR**. Later in Chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel, we know that Mary & Joseph took Jesus to the temple to be circumcised. They wouldn't have had enough money to bring a lamb as an offering, so instead they brought doves. And yet the lack of money or social status didn't affect God's desire to use her. God knew her heart. He wanted her to be part of his plan for salvation.

So she's young, poor but she's also from Nazareth. There really wasn't much happening there. In fact it would be Nathanael who in later years would say "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?". It probably was the size of Ballynure, and yet the Saviour of the world would live there. You see, it doesn't matter to God. It doesn't matter about your age, your wealth or your background.

As a church family, this has to be the greatest challenge that I face as a leader – that of getting people to step forward. And the pressure folks of this on myself and David is very tangible. There are days where if I'm honest we want to scream, because even for the easiest of tasks, we can't get people to be available. And yet throughout scripture we are reminded of our need to be available to the God's service. I Peter 4 tells us to serve one another, as good stewards of God's grace. Jesus has told us that the greatest person in his eyes is the one who is the servant. He also teaches us to seek after his Kingdom before anything else in life. Philippians 2 tells us to not look to our own interests, but instead to the interests of others. And then finally said that anyone who would follow him would have to deny themselves.

That's exactly what Mary did. She didn't allow anything of her background, past, ability to get in the way of her obedience. What shines through for me about her is her humility, her willingness to be part of God's plan, and also her obedience to God's Word. She didn't just volunteer to God's request, it came from a place of her faithfulness to follow the Lord no matter what.

For this Church family, God is searching for humble, obedient people to take part in His amazing plans. Mary teaches us that no matter who you are, God can use you.

SECONDLY, MARY TEACHES US IS THAT NO MATTER WHAT PROBLEMS YOU FACE AS A BELIEVER, YOU CAN BE ASSURED THAT GOD IS WITH YOU.

For everyone of us, have you considered how many people tomorrow will be on their own for Christmas? After the services tomorrow, I make it a tradition to head straight to the hospital to be with those people who won't be home for the Christmas celebrations. I believe it's such an important thing for people to know they are not alone. I remember a number of years ago, my father in law arriving on Christmas Day to our house having stopped with his friend Eric from the bowling club, and inviting him to come to our house for the day, rather than being on his own. I don't think I knew that he was coming, but there was always going to be plenty of food to go round. Eric knew that he was not alone.

And isn't the message of the Church that we are never alone? The one person you need more than anybody else when you face problems is God. Mary teaches us that no matter what problems you face, if you have given your life over entirely to God, then God by his Spirit will never leave you. The angel says in verse 30, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God".

And yet she had every reason to worry, she knew that Joseph might walk away and disown her. And then the even bigger fear that the wider community would find out, with the possible risk of stoning. Mary's fears were well grounded. You see, the message from the angel totally changed her life. She was getting ready to be married and live a normal life, but her life would never be the same again!

She must have clung to Gabriel's words in verse 28: "The Lord is with you." The Lord would **BE WITH** her; He would **HELP** her; He would give her the strength and courage to face anything.

And our God makes that same promise to you and to me.

- In Psalms 118 the Psalmist declared, "The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.

What can mere mortals do to me?

⁷ The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I look in triumph on my enemies".

- God promises in Hebrews 13:5: "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Mary faced all these scary things—but she knew that the Lord would never abandon her. I love the title that the prophet Isaiah gave 400 years before the arrival of Jesus. He said that he would be called “Immanuel,” which means “God WITH us.” Immanuel says that each and every day, God is with you. Immanuel says that in those scary decisions, or that hospital appointment, God is with you. God is fully aware of the mess of life, because he himself has experienced it in Immanuel.

The story of Mary reminds us that no matter who you are, God can use you and no matter what problems you face, God is with you. It also means that nothing is impossible to God whatever fear or uncertainty or lack of confidence that you face. Remember how Paul described it to the Philippians “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”.

WHICH LEADS NICELY INTO MY LAST POINT, THAT MARY’S STORY TEACHES US NO MATTER WHAT GOD PROMISES, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE FOR HIM.

There are many sceptics out there that just can’t reason in their minds when they hear of stories of the immaculate conception, and other biblical stories. Even Thomas, one of Jesus’ disciples doubted his existence after his death. And when it comes to out-of-the-ordinary births, the bible records several instances.

- God sent a son to Abraham and Sarah long after normal childbearing age. (She was 90 and he was 100!)
- In Judges 13, an angel of the Lord told Manoah and his childless wife that they would have a special son they would name Samson. Samuel, the first prophet and last of the judges was the answer to the faithful, persevering prayers of his godly mother, Hannah—well beyond child-bearing age.
- John the Baptist’s mother, Elizabeth, was in her sixties or seventies when she gave birth to the prophet.

And yet in the midst of what would seem like science fiction, Mary’s response was ‘I am the Lord’s servant, May your word to me be fulfilled.’

Even though the angel’s news was unbelievable, Mary BELIEVED it! She didn’t UNDERSTAND it, but neither did she DOUBT it. She believed that no matter what God promised, GOD COULD DO IT!

Even after all these centuries, the miraculous conception remains impossible to understand by human reason alone. God chose not to explain the details of it to us. But the real issue is NOT whether a virgin can conceive; but whether ANYTHING is impossible for God.

Mary knew that a virgin birth is impossible in the natural course of events, but she also believed that “nothing is impossible with God.” Her life teaches us that whatever God promises, He delivers; no matter what He promises, He will do it”.

I wonder today, as you look into 2024, do you doubt that God can fulfil much in you? God has placed promises over every one of us, but I wonder how much you believe them? Even more basic than that, have you ever taken the time to know what God has promised for your life? Or are we all just too busy in life, that we feel as though we are just fighting out the next fire in our lives.

You might remember that Martha came to Jesus after the death of Lazarus and complained that if he had been on time, her brother wouldn’t have died. She had lost all hope in Jesus. And yet he replied, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this Martha?”

You see she couldn't see beyond the finality of the grave, and yet for Jesus this wasn't an obstacle. For each of us, if we take the time to sit on God's word and hear his promises over our lives, we have got to believe that they will be fulfilled. We've got to start believing, like Mary did. There may be things ahead of us into 2024 that seem impossible to address, but remember that with God nothing is impossible if it's his will.

Like Mary do we want to see God's will done? Do we believe in the John's words in I John 5:14, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us".

What we all have to do is what Mary did: we've got to BELIEVE GOD'S WORDS! Say to Him, "Let it be to me according to Your Word, O Lord."

God has left an incredible record in the life of a very young, poor girl from Nazareth, teaching all of us as a Church family that :

- No matter who you are, or where you have come from, or what has gone on in the past, God wants you to be faithful to him and he will use you in an incredible way.
- That whatever you have to face, as a Christian, you have the confidence of God's Holy Spirit with you at all times. You are not alone.
- And finally if God has promised something in your life, even if it seems impossible to you, God will do it. Remember what God said through the prophet Isaiah (55:11) the "word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it".

So folks, take some encouragement today from a young girl such as Mary, with such an incredible trust in the Lord. Mary was nothing special in the world's eyes, and neither are we, but in and through God, there is much that can be achieved for him, if like Mary we declare those words to the Lord "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."