

Advent IV, 2024 – Lk. 1:39-55

‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’.

You may have noticed that Helen and I have been out and about quite a bit recently, covering services elsewhere in the Deanery, usually in parishes that are between vicars. It’s always interesting to see how other churches are doing things. Last week, it was my turn to go down to St. Michael’s and All Angels, in West Watford. And there, I think for the very first time, I had to begin a service with the Angelus.

What’s the Angelus, you might say, perfectly reasonably. It’s not something we do up here, not something much of the Church of England does to be honest. At least, not now. But before the Reformation – that is, the sixteenth century split between Catholic and Protestant – the people of St. Lawrence would *definitely* have known the Angelus. And in the Catholic world it is still a very, very well-known, used, loved, prayer. It’s basically the Hail Mary prayer, said three times, with other short prayer requests interspersed. And the Hail Mary prayer you *might* know. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

Now, the reason we don’t say that prayer in church, and why many Anglicans don’t even know it, is because historically we have thought that Catholics pay *far* too much attention to Mary. We have wanted to say, look. There is only one bridge between human beings and God, and that’s Jesus. He’s the only one you need; the only one you pray to. Statues of Mary, rosary beads, the Angelus, the Hail Mary ... when we’ve been cross, we’ve said that these things smack a little of idolatry: treating Mary as if she’s God. When we’ve been a bit calmer, we’ve just tended to ignore them.

Which at one level, of course, is fine. We’ve always said that the essentials of the faith are in the Creed, and although Mary is mentioned in the Creed, not much about is said about there, other than when Jesus was conceived she was a Virgin. So it’s wrong, we would say, to develop all sorts of theories and beliefs about Mary and make them essential to being Christian. And so, at that one level, feel free to entirely disregard the rest of this sermon.

However... maybe we’re missing something special, something valuable. Maybe there is indeed something about Mary worth paying a bit more attention to. I think we’re given some clues as to what that might be in our Gospel reading today.

Now, before anyone presses the idolatry panic button, notice two things about that reading. Number one: when Elizabeth greets Mary, she says: blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. The focus goes straight onto Jesus. Why is Mary blessed? Because of whom she's carrying. Not in her own right, not by herself, but because she is the mother of the Lord. Mary matters because of Jesus. Number two: how does Mary respond to Elizabeth? By singing what becomes known as the Magnificat: 'my soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour' – in other words, she praises God. Elizabeth hails Mary; Mary turns to God. She doesn't set herself up as the centre of devotion. She doesn't occupy the place of God. She doesn't get worshipped; she worships.

Mary matters because of Jesus. Mary doesn't get worshipped, but worships. Keep those in mind, and we don't need to be afraid of idolatry. Hold onto those, and we won't go far wrong.

And we might get to see something special about Mary.

Think of that line from Elizabeth, and indeed from the Hail Mary prayer, 'blessed are thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.'

Blessed is the fruit of thy womb. That's an interesting phrase. That says to me that Mary doesn't just carry Jesus in the way that a plastic bag might carry your shopping. Or that a box just holds something within it. No. He is fruit of her womb. He grows from her. Everything about him: his flesh, his bones, his blood, his laugh, his looks, his personality, his whole humanity ... everything about him somehow, although He remains truly God, comes to be through her, shaped by her, formed by her. He grows from her as fruit grows from the tree.

And if that's true, then truly, blessed art thou amongst women. That is: to play this role, to grow this Gift, to be the bearer, the shaper, the former, the Mother of God made flesh, that's no ordinary woman. Well, in one sense it is, of course, the glory is that she is one of us, just a girl from Nazareth ... but at the same time, what an astonishing vocation, what an awesome calling. Who must you be to do that? What must you be? Well, the Angel Gabriel tells us, back in Luke 1:28: Greetings, favoured one! *Ke-kari -tome* is the Greek. Greetings, Highly favoured one; highly graced one; oh one filled with grace. As the prayer puts it, Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Mary is the one whose whole life is flooded with grace, made ready to say her 'yes' to God – that 'yes' on which the whole Gospel hangs.

Have you noticed, by the way, how the Hail Mary prayer is, nearly all of it, just straight quotation from the Bible? *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord be with you.* That's Gabriel in the Annunciation story. *Blessed are thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.* That's Elizabeth, in today's Gospel. *Holy Mary, Mother of God:* that is a kind of mash-up of them both. So far, so biblical. It's a good Protestant prayer. The only bit that really isn't is the last bit, 'pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.' And fascinatingly, that's the only bit that doesn't go right the way back to the first few centuries of the Christian Church. Those last words only appeared in the late medieval era, when all sorts of theology had started to go wrong, and when we ended up having a Reformation to go back to basics.

But maybe one thing we didn't quite realise, and still don't quite realise, is that a proper respect for Mary - a proper reverence for Mary - perhaps even - once we're clear that Mary only matters because of Jesus, and that she is never worshipped but always worships - perhaps even a proper *devotion* to Mary - this is *part* of the basics. It's not essential to Christianity, perhaps: as said before, that's the Creed. But it is part of its proper richness. Part of its full glory. That's something which the early Church understood: which is why the Hail Mary started, why the Angelus, why there are more churches - *many* more churches - dedicated to Mary than to any other saint; why we name-check her in every Eucharistic Prayer. Truly, all generations have called her blessed.

It's Advent IV. We don't do much about Mary here; our focus is rightly, properly, where Mary herself would have it. But this is Advent IV; Mary's Sunday. And it's right, today, to give her her due. Greetings, Highly Favoured one. Blessed are thou amongst women, blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. And now, as she would say, time to turn towards the one she helped give us. Time to move from Advent IV to Christmas. In company with, in gratitude to, in reverence for the Blessed Virgin Mary, time to turn where she points us: towards her Son, towards God-made-flesh, for us and for our salvation.

To him be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.