**Luke 1:26-38**

**Finding the miracle in the mess**

There is something profoundly moving, I think, about God’s visitation into Mary’s life and her call to bear the Christ-child into the world. In verse 28, the angel Gabriel says to Mary, “Greetings, favoured one!” It is beautiful, isn’t it, that Mary should be highly favoured by God: what a wonderful young woman she must have been to be highly favoured, what an incredible calling on her life to bear the Saviour of the World to be chosen for that ministry and to be blessed by God in that way.

 And yet, as it is with us, so it was with Mary that her life became a study of contrasts.

 Here in 1:28, the angel Gabriel says to her, “You are the favoured one”. But in 2:35, Simeon in the Temple says to her, “A sword will pierce your own soul”. In 2:52, we read that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour - and how wonderful it would have been for Mary in that Nazareth home to watch her child develop in this way. But not so many years later, we read another story that Mary would have seen from her Nazareth home, recorded in 4:29: “The crowd got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.” How devastating that would have been for Mary to witness. Mary was no doubt rejoicing on Palm Sunday as the crowd greeted her son so enthusiastically: at long last, after all these years, he had been vindicated and the shame that had rested on the family was now gone as people recognised her boy for who he truly was. And yet, a week later, she watches him die in agony on the cross; the glory has gone and the shame has returned for this final, agonising scene.

 What a study of contrasts Mary’s life had become.

 The angel Gabriel had said, “Greetings, highly favoured one!” Perhaps Mary reflected on that encounter when she stood at the foot of the cross and reflected on the pain she had felt throughout her life, how the sword had pierced her soul and thought to herself, “If I am highly favoured by God, he has a strange way of showing it”.

 Yes, Mary had known moments of deep joy in her life – of course she had - but she had also been taken into moments of deep, deep pain beyond understanding.

 Her life, like ours, was a study of contrasts: joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, clarity and confusion, purposeful and aimless. And Mary, like us, had to learn to navigate the waters of life in such a way as to find meaning and purpose as a child of God.

 In verse 38 of our reading, Mary said to the angel Gabriel, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” But from that moment onwards, it seemed like her life had descended into chaos…

 Firstly, Mary’s marriage was in a mess: we all know the story. Mary had become pregnant during the period of betrothal and, under the law of the Torah, she faced divorce at the very least and possibly even being stoned or killed for her perceived behaviour. Mary had become a disgrace to the family and an embarrassment to Joseph and he considered a quick and quiet annulment of the betrothal as a result. Her marriage was a mess.

 Secondly, Mary’s finances were in a mess: again, we know the story. In Luke 2, we are told about the census that Caesar Augustus had ordered and how Mary and Joseph had to return to Bethlehem to be registered but when they arrived, there was no room for them to stay anywhere. Well, call me cynical, but I’m pretty sure a room could have been found if they had enough cash to pay for it and a little more besides; I’m sure the palm of an enterprising innkeeper could have been greased with a few extra denarii. But Joseph was just a carpenter – not much money in that, I suppose, so their financial mess resulted in Mary giving birth in the worst possible conditions and she had to lay her baby in the animals’ feeding trough.

 Her marriage was in a mess. Her finances were in a mess.

 Thirdly, her community was in a mess. Mary was a good Jewish women, growing up under the tyranny of an oppressive military dictatorship. The Romans were very much in control; the ordering of a census had proved that - but even their own leaders, like King Herod, were tyrants who ruled over society with a rod of iron. Not so many years previously, there had been a civil uprising, a revolt against the Romans and even now, in Mary’s day, the world was a dangerous place in which to bring a child.

 The angel Gabriel had said, “Greetings, highly favoured one!” The calling was beautiful – but the reality seemed to be so different: her marriage was in a mess, her finances were in a mess, her community was in a mess.

 Mary’s world was in a mess.

 I wonder if there are times when we feel like Mary? Perhaps today is one of those times.

 We look at our lives and we see chaos and mess: relationships are not how we would like them to be. Perhaps there is financial stress or employment is causing anxiety. Perhaps we feel trapped and unable to escape from our day-to-day pressures. We may look at our lives and all we see is mess.

 Sometimes it seems such a stark contrast to the hopes and dreams we once held and we may wonder where God’s favour has gone in our lives.

 But, of course, something else was happening in this story about Mary…

 Yes, her life was a mess: but there was an emerging miracle in that mess: Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World was emerging from her, and whilst she considered the external circumstances and could only see mess, God was looking through all that and witnessing the birth of a miracle.

 For Mary, the miracle was being obscured by the mess - but that did not mean that the miracle was any less real…

 I wonder if there is a miracle in your mess, in my mess? Maybe it is obscured right now. But if we are able to look at the circumstances of our lives differently, perhaps we may get a glimpse, just a glimpse, of the miracle emerging.

 I believe in miracles, though I rarely see, or even expect, instantaneous ones. Instead, I believe that miracles emerge: they don’t come fully-grown – they need to be nurtured and safeguarded in the womb of our being.

 Isn’t that what Mary had to do? The miracle was in the mess. But for 9 months she had to carry it in secret. And even when people saw the signs of the miracle growing within her and heaped scorn and abuse on her and misunderstood the miracle within, she still kept it secret and loved the miracle and guarded it with her own being.

 And even when she gave birth to the miracle, she had to care for it and nurture it and guard it; first by carefully wrapping it and feeding it and then by escaping to Egypt with it and then by returning to a safe haven, Galilee, away from Nazareth.

 And we read again Luke 2:52 – “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour”” - and we reflect differently on that verse this time. We think just how much of that developmental growth was a result of the loving care of Mary and the way in which she nurtured and reared the miracle day after day, year after year.

 I believe in miracles and I believe that there is a miracle in every mess. But it needs to be sought out carefully: we need to allow it time to emerge - and we need to nurture it and safeguard it and allow it to grow in our lives.

 If I asked you, “What is the mess in your life?”, you may be able to give me a quick and clear answer almost without thinking about it. If I asked you, “What is the miracle emerging from the mess?, could you answer that? Have you seen it yet? Are you able to nurture that miracle at the moment?

 Our lives are a study of contrasts, just like Mary’s. There is often a set of external circumstances that are a complete mess - but the inner reality may well be an emerging miracle and we need to be able to see both at the same time.

 The angel Gabriel said to Mary, “Greetings, highly favoured one”. The word ‘favoured’ has its Greek roots in the idea that God is bestowing his grace on us. It is God’s grace that, whatever mess our lives may be at the present time, a miracle is emerging from that. It is an act of grace that even those circumstances that may seem beyond redemption can not only be redeemed but can even be blessed and can be the soil in which a beautiful miracle will grow.

 And whatever the miracle is that is emerging from your mess, God will give you the grace to stand firm and endure and eventually come to the place where you can embrace the miracle and nurture it. In Philippians 2:13, Paul has this to say: “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”. God is at work in you – the miracle is emerging from the mess - and his grace is sufficient for you to stand firm and eventually act on the miracle according to his good purpose.

 And that, of course, is the incredible nature of the Nativity of Jesus: that a miracle emerges from chaos and, in God’s good providence, it is not that the miracle emerges *despite* the chaos but that *the chaos itself* is part of the emerging miracle. Let me explain that a little further…

 The nativity of Jesus occurs in Bethlehem - a tiny village in a backwater of Israel, a place of no renown, an instantly forgettable place. So who could ever have dreamt that a miracle would emerge out of somewhere so anonymous and ordinary. And yet it does – because this ordinary place was the right place for the miracle to happen, Micah 5:2, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

 A miracle emerges from the ordinary – because it is the right place.

 The nativity of Jesus, the birth of the King of Israel, occurs at a time when the powers and authorities had never been stronger or more consolidated: the Romans were in ultimate control and the Jewish authorities were a force to be reckoned with. So who would ever have dreamt that a new leader, a new King would emerge at that time?

 And yet he does – because this time of power and authority was the right time for the miracle of a new power and a new authority to emerge. In Luke 1:32, 33, the angel Gabriel says: “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.”

 A miracle emerges at this point in history – because this time is the right time.

 The nativity of Jesus, the birth of the Saviour of the world, occurs in a chaotic mess so that order can be brought to the whole of creation and all things can be redeemed and fulfil their original destiny. In Luke 1, we have Mary’s song recorded - what we often call the Magnificat: “His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation…He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendents for ever, even as he said to our fathers.”

 Who would have dreamt that salvation for the world could be wrought through such a messy act as incarnation into a broken world?

 And yet it does. A miracle emerges out of the chaos – because it is the right thing.

 You see, God does not somehow transcend the chaos and mess of our lives and work a miracle in us despite that chaos and mess. Instead, he uses the chaos and mess to give birth to the miracle.

 Your chaos, your mess, is the womb for God’s miracle - a miracle will emerge from the mess because this is the right place at the right time for the right thing.

 If we look at our lives from a purely human perspective, we may only see mess. But if we try to discern the hand of God on us, we may just see a miracle emerging from the mess. Sometimes, we need to sift through the rubble and the debris of bad decisions, inappropriate actions and wrong choices - but, as we do that, so the miracle can be observed.

 The miracle may not be birthed tonight, or even tomorrow - it may be growing inside of you and you will need to guard it secretly for a while longer. But in the right place at the right time, the miracle you need will be born. It will emerge into your life and it will be the right thing for you.

 Like Mary, we need to be able to look deeply into our circumstances and trust that God is growing a miracle inside us. If we can do that, we will be able to make some sense of the mess and learn to see it for what it is; the birthplace of a miracle. And then our faith in God will increase and we will be able to join with Mary and say: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”