

SERMON 1

THE OBEDIENCE OF MARY

Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Our subject is 'The Obedience of Mary', and I'd like to develop three themes as we look at it. The first is that of *trust*: as we'll see, obedience works best in a relationship of trust. Secondly, there's the idea of 'the bigger picture' – which God can see, of course, but which ordinary mortals can rarely see at the point where their obedience is required. That's what makes the trusting so important. And my third theme – see if you can spot it as we go through!

Let's pray...

Heavenly Father, thank you for the opportunity to reflect on this dramatic event in the life of a young woman 2000 years ago, an event which has implications for all of *us*, and for the whole world. Please send your Holy Spirit to bring the passage alive for us in a new way. Meet with each one of us, and challenge us to move on with you. Amen.

I'm getting older and greyer by the year – know the feeling? – but I can still remember what it's like to be a teenager! It's a time of transition: lots of things changing, some of them too quickly and others not nearly quickly enough. Too much homework and not enough money; some things don't change! But back in the time of our reading, girls in their mid-teens like Mary didn't have the luxury of worrying about school work: they were facing the demands of marriage or, in Mary's case a pledge to be married; a betrothal. This was much more formal and binding than an engagement today; it could be dissolved only by death – no changing of minds allowed in those days.

In his gospel, Luke slots Mary's story into the middle of another woman's story. It's the story of Elizabeth, one of Mary's relatives. Elizabeth was much older, and had probably resigned herself to childlessness; she was past the age when she could expect to fall pregnant. In those days, the inability to bear a child brought even greater pain than it does today, because it was seen as a sign of God's displeasure. But God had heard their prayers for a child! Today's reading begins with 'In the sixth month', and that's referring to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. But Mary was unaware of this miracle, so let's put it aside for one moment, and concentrate on her story...

I don't know what Mary was doing but, whatever it was, the Angel Gabriel's arrival must have been a tremendous shock. And the greeting didn't exactly help: 'Hello Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you!' We're told that 'Mary was greatly troubled and wondered what kind of greeting this might be'. I don't blame her, do you?

Verse 31: 'Don't be afraid', said Gabriel. Did that help? I'm not sure... 'You have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to

give him the name Jesus. 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.'

Immediately, the angel's words shift our eyes from Mary's circumstances to a panoramic view; to God's bigger picture. We begin to see the events as part of a long history – the history of God's people, the Jews, going back hundreds of years to King David; going back even further to Jacob, the founder of Israel. And looking to the future, Mary's baby will not only reign over that long-standing kingdom but, unlike his famous ancestors, his reign will never end. Imagine that!

Imagine also teenager Mary, trying to take it all in... She hasn't *begun* to grapple with the idea of a king whose reign will surpass anything ever seen in her nation... because her attention was grabbed by something earlier in the conversation... er... hold on a minute... did you say... 'baby'? 'But *how*?' she asks, not unreasonably.

Gabriel's explanation about the Holy Spirit coming upon her, and God's power bringing about a conception in a truly miraculous way, is something we're very familiar with. But I wonder what it was like for Mary to hear it for the first time. 'Mind-blowing' doesn't even come close.

It's at this point that we see God's compassionate nature and his mercy in action: the angel tells Mary about the miracle which has *already happened* to her relative, and adds that nothing is impossible with God – which Elizabeth's pregnancy underlines. And of course this news means that Mary is immediately able to rush off to see her joyfully-pregnant relative; someone rather older, whose faith has been boosted by her own amazing miracle. Mary can feel safe with her; she can be encouraged by her company – and her prophetic words – while she comes to terms with what is happening to her own body... And works out how to tell Joseph...

It would be good to take a moment here to deal with the old chestnut of the virgin birth: wasn't all this visiting-angel-and-God-overshadowing stuff just a desperate girl's attempt to explain a rather embarrassing bump that shouldn't have been there? Well, no, it wasn't. Firstly, because Luke makes it clear that Mary rushed off to tell Elizabeth before her pregnancy was obvious. And what's more, before Mary had even got in the door, Elizabeth had greeted her with a prophetic utterance confirming that she was bearing a very special baby! That's in verse 42.

Secondly, looking at the bigger issue of whether a virgin birth is credible: I don't see any problem with the idea. If there is an almighty God who can create all that 'is', seen and unseen, as we say in the creed – and I do believe that there *is* such a God – then he's more than capable of bringing about a pregnancy in a supernatural way, so that his Son can be born as a human being. A virgin birth sounds a big deal to us, but for an almighty God it's no problem at all! If we doubt that it's possible, what we're actually doing is bringing God down to our level; we're effectively saying that God is not all-mighty: it's too difficult for him. 'Nothing is impossible with God', said the

angel, and some of us here have had experiences of things happening which we've been solemnly assured were impossible.

So... Mary's obedience... can we really say she was 'obedient'? *Did she have any choice?* Let's go back to the passage, and to Mary's response in verse 38: 'I am the Lord's servant... may it be to me as you have said'. Now this is definitely not the equivalent of a modern teenager's 'whatever'! It's a positive embracing of God's purposes for her life. Mary was a godly young woman who was *ready to serve God*. We see that in her song of response after Elizabeth's prophetic confirmation. That's verse 46 onwards: 'My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...' Mary's praise of God is expressed in the language and phraseology of the Jewish scriptures. It sounds rather like an Old Testament psalm, doesn't it? But it's not – it's Mary's own song. And this shows the extent to which God's word had formed the way Mary thought about life and everything. It also shows that she was aware of the history of her people; of God's faithfulness to them, all the way back to Abraham. If you can, it would be good to make time to read Mary's Song in full.

It's in Mary's response that we find one of the challenges which I hope we'll be prepared to take on this morning. 'I am the Lord's servant... may it be to me as you have said'. Are we prepared for Mary's words to challenge *us* to obedience; to embrace God's purposes for our lives – even if, like Mary, we don't understand all the details. That *doesn't* mean that we have to like everything that happens to us and around us! It *doesn't* mean that we have to pretend to be happy when bad things happen to good people. But it *is* a challenge to remember whom we serve, and to keep praying, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done', even if we're too overwhelmed to pray anything else.

At the moment, some of our church family are finding life extremely difficult, and we're all feeling the pain of being alongside those who are suffering and grieving. In connection with that, last week my husband, Stephen, shared briefly about a time 57 years ago when he was in hospital with burns. He and his parents were among the five who survived when a Dakota flew into the Pennines. His two year old brother was killed, and his mother was quite seriously injured. But Stephen's parents were committed to following Jesus, and they knew the Lord to be faithful. On the days when their trust felt as if it was barely able to keep up, the Lord kept holding on to them. The outcome wasn't dependent on their ability to sail through it all: it was dependent on God's faithfulness. At that dreadful time, the Lord was carrying them, and the weight of it all.

But there's another bit of the story which Stephen didn't have time for last week. Not long after the plane crash, a missionary friend came to the hospital, and said a very strange thing to his parents. He said, 'You must start praying for Stephen's future wife!' Now, as hospital chit-chat goes, this was far out, especially as Stephen had just had his sixth birthday in hospital! And *what a thing to say* to people recovering from a plane crash! But, give them their due, Stephen's parents heard this as a word from God, and in obedience they began to pray as suggested. And here we see again God's

much bigger perspective on things; we see his mercy expressed in a way they couldn't possibly have understood at the time... because this conversation probably took place about a fortnight before I was born. Once Stephen and I were married, I learned that I'd been prayed for all my life. How good is that!

I've referred back to Stephen's family's story, firstly because I think it shows how it's possible to choose to embrace God's purposes for our lives, even when the going is tough and we're not sure what anything means. It's an example of the blessing which can result when we take God at his word, and trust and obey him, even when we feel we're about to be crushed by our circumstances. Stephen's parents weren't perfect Christians – they'd have been the first to admit that – but they did know where to turn in times of trouble; they knew where to place their hope.

Their story is also an example of God reaching down to a family in distress and giving them a tiny window, to help them look *beyond* all the pain and grief; a way of saying to them, 'Look, there's a bigger picture. I have a future and a hope for you; and *I'm going to carry you through to it*. But meanwhile, here's a focus for your prayers'. In the thick of troubles it's often very difficult for us to think beyond how to survive the next five minutes. But God's perspective, as always, is so much bigger than ours. Yes, he's right there with us in our pain. Even when we're not aware of him, he's there... And sometimes, as we look to him, we may see glimpses of his bigger picture which can encourage us to hang on in there.

Health crises and accidents are part of living in a fallen world which no longer runs as God designed it to run. But because he's almighty he's able to turn these things around and use them for his purposes and for our good. Adversity becomes an opportunity for him to refine us, to shape us, maybe even to transform us. So... how is the Lord going to bring good out of the experiences of those here who've been suffering pain and grief? How is he going to use our church family which has been learning to care and support to an even greater extent than before? I don't know! But watch this space – watch and see God's plans unfold – and thank him for what he's already doing to bring good out of the suffering, even though we can't see most of it yet.

Returning to the Virgin Mary... Even if she was unable to grasp the full consequences of being the mother of God's Son, she'd have been in no doubt about the consequences of having a baby out of wedlock. In those days, unmarried mothers could be stoned to death, but it was more usual to shun them – treat them as outcasts. So to say, 'I am the Lord's servant... may it be to me as you have said', would have taken *great* courage, *great* character.

It's worth reflecting on the kind of person Mary was *before* all this happened. Yes, she was an ordinary teenage girl in the sense that she wasn't from a noble family, or from one whose doings had been particularly note-worthy. But she'd have heard the scriptures read from an early age, and her response shows that she'd absorbed the biblical way of looking at life. She *must* have developed a considerable degree of trust in this God she'd heard about. Because, when the angel came, she was open and

receptive to God's plans; she was ready to serve him. '...may it be to me as you have said'.

It's a mistake to see Mary's obedience as coming 'out of the blue'. It was the culmination of years of preparation, absorbing godly values and prayerfully living according to God's will. That's the thing about genuine obedience, as opposed to compliance. True obedience doesn't come out of the blue; it comes out of a degree of mutual knowledge and understanding. Mary's heart says, 'I can't understand all the details of how its going to work out, but I trust you, Lord, and so I choose to be your obedient servant'.

And that's the final challenge I want to flag up for us this morning: Are we learning to trust and obey? How's our character development going? Are we prayerfully living according to God's will, absorbing godly values from the scriptures... Do we *want* the Holy Spirit to shape the way we think and live...? Are we in training for the challenges the Lord has for *us* in the future...? Our challenges will be different from Mary's, but God has plans for each one of us, and the question is: are we ready to embrace them?

Matthew's gospel quotes Isaiah, who foretold the birth of Jesus, calling him 'Immanuel', which means 'God with us': 'Immanuel – God with us'. And that links up with the third thread that's been running through all I've said this morning. When God looked for obedience from Mary, he didn't abandon her to get on with it; he was with her every step of the way. God looks for obedience from us as well, but *not from a distance!* He's Immanuel – God with us. He's right here with us, in our difficult choices, in our pain, in our grief. He was right there with Stephen and his parents in 1949. I know there are many others here who could give testimony to God's faithfulness.

So how may we respond to all that right now? It really depends on where we are on the journey. If you're still in the starting blocks, you need first to receive Jesus as your Saviour, and commit your life to him. If you'd like someone to pray with you and help you with making this commitment, then please speak to me or to someone else after the service. If you're already on the journey, perhaps you'd like to consider saying Amen to a prayer I'm about to pray. [Displayed on overhead]

It's a prayer expressing trust. Maybe you don't feel you can say the words at the moment, because you haven't yet reached that level of trust. If so, perhaps you'd like to pray that the Lord will help you to grow in trust until you *are* able to pray it. I've brought some copies with me, so you could take one home to pray when you're ready. Everyone's welcome to have a copy. It could be a good prayer to pray from time to time as we get ready for another new year.

So let's all pray: either this prayer with me, or something else you feel you can pray more honestly:

Whatever today is like,

Jesus, we welcome you to be `God-with-us' in it.

**Whatever tomorrow holds,
Jesus, we welcome you to be `God-with-us' in it.**

**And the longer term future,
which sometimes feels more than we can cope with,
we trust you for it.**

**Please show us how to pray and to live,
so that your good purposes may be served.
`Your kingdom come, your will be done'.**

Amen.