

4th Sunday of Advent 2023 Luke 1:26-38. This messy, miraculous life!

Today, the fourth Sunday of Advent, the gospel reading focuses on what we call the annunciation, when God visited Mary through the angel Gabriel with the amazing words from today's gospel, "Greetings favoured one!" (1:28)

This morning we are going to think about what we have in common with this very uncommon woman. Gabriel went on to tell her that she has been called to bear the Saviour of the World, this fifteen or so year old girl from a poor village in a poor province of the Roman Empire.

Well that's one thing we don't have in common we might think; but hang on, perhaps we might. Let's hold this thought.

Much like ours, Mary's was a life of great contrasts, of ups and downs. Despite being "the favoured one" the elderly temple prophet in Jerusalem, Simeon, prophesying Jesus' death says to Mary, "and a sword will pierce your own soul as well" (Luke 2:35).

How wonderful it would have been for Mary to watch her boy grow. Luke writes that "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour" (2:40).

Talk about ups and downs! At the start of his ministry, the crowd in his hometown of Nazareth, "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" (Luke 4:29).

How devastating that would have been for Mary to witness. These were her community, and they are trying to kill her son.

Mary, too, would have been 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 (teenage pregnancy) 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.

Her life, like ours, was a study of contrasts: joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, clarity and confusion. From the moment of Gabriel's announcement to her, it may have seemed that her life had descended into chaos.

Firstly, Mary's engagement was about to become complicated. 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, until the angel spoke to him as well.

Her community was compromised and living in chaotic times. Mary was a good Jewish woman, 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.

"Greetings, highly favoured one!" The calling was beautiful – but the reality seemed to be so different. All this promise, all this chaos!

Where has God's favour gone? Was the angel real? Does God know what is happened down here in my life?

But something else is happening here is the story of Mary, and it is happening in our own lives too. In all the mess of Mary's life, a miracle was emerging. Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world was emerging from her, the birth of a miracle.

Perhaps we too, after all, may bear Jesus. What if there were a miracle emerging in our own lives and in the wonderful corporate life of our parish.

Miracles are rarely instantaneous, but emerge, not full grown but needing to be nurtured and tended to by God in the womb of our souls and spirits.

And I think that's what Mary had to do, too. The miracle was in the mess of her pregnancy and engagement.

For nine months she had to carry it in secret. And even when people saw the signs of the miracle growing within her and mocked and abused her and misunderstood the miracle within, she still kept it locked in her heart and treasured it. She loved the miracle and guarded it with her own being.

And whatever that miracle is that is emerging from what can seem like chaos, God gives us the grace to stand firm and endure and eventually come to the place where you can embrace the miracle and nurture it.

God is at work in us – the miracle is emerging from the mess - and his grace is sufficient for us 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. Now in God's good design, it is not that the miracle emerges *despite* the chaos but that *the chaos itself* is part of the emerging miracle.

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.?

A miracle emerges from the ordinary – because it is the right place. The miracle emerged in a time and place in history when nothing was more dangerous for an infant than to be born in Bethlehem at that time. Herod killed them all but could not kill the miracle because Mary and Joseph took the miracle with them to Egypt. *Nothing can kill our own emerging miracles either.*

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. God does not somehow transcend the chaos and mess of our lives and work a miracle in us despite that chaos and mess.

No, no, no. God uses the chaos and mess to give birth to the miracle. God says to us "Greetings, highly favoured one!"

Our chaos, our 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 this to happen.

The miracle may not be birthed tonight, or even tomorrow, but at just the right time it emerges and is the right thing for you. It emerges at exactly the time we can say, "this is a miracle!"

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" (1:38). Let me pray ...