

Home Group study: week beginning 6th December 2020

Against All Odds — Mary

There's a famous old English Christmas carol, written in 1430 but still performed today: some of you may know it. The words are as follows:

Adam lay ybounden
Bounden in a bond
Four thousand winters
Thought he not too long
And all was for an apple
An apple that he took
As clerkes finden written in their book

What it is saying is that scholars find 'written in their book' that by taking the apple Adam was bound in a bond of sin for 4,000 years (until Jesus came). 'Their book' was, of course, the Bible (Genesis 3): this was written at a time when most people were illiterate and relied on scholarly people to interpret the Bible for them.

But the bit we need to think about is what comes next.

Nay had the apple taken been
The apple taken been
Nay had never our lady
Abeen heavenly queen
Blessed be the time
That apple taken was
Therefore we moun singen
Deo gracias, deo gracias!

Which translates into modern English as:

If the apple hadn't been taken,
Our Lady (Mary) would never have become
Queen of Heaven.
So, for that reason, the taking of the apple
should be considered a blessing and we must
sing:
'Thanks be to God, Thanks be to God!

Bearing in mind that England was still a Roman Catholic country in 1430, what do we think of these words? Why do you think the Roman Catholics think so highly of Mary?

Read: Luke 1: 26-38

Discovery

We talked about the meaning of 'pledged to be married' last week and Dave reminded us of it on Sunday. How does it differ from being 'engaged'? What would it have meant to Mary to be found to be pregnant before being married: and not by Joseph? In view of that, what do we think of her response in verse 38?

What reason does the Angel give for Mary being chosen to bear God's son (v30)?

How do you think Mary must have felt when told she had found favour with God?

What do verses 32 and 33 tell us about Jesus?

Mary was probably still reeling from having found favour with God; how do you think she now felt as more of the truth was revealed to her?

Understanding

Verse 34 is a question which is still asked today. Indeed it is a stumbling block for many people trying to come to a belief in Jesus. What would you say to someone who asks you, 'How could Jesus have been born to a virgin?'

Does it really matter whether Jesus was born to a virgin? Assuming it does, of course, consider the reasons why it matters. *Here are a few pointers to guide your discussion:*

- *Because of 'original sin' Jesus could not have been born sinless had his father been a man;*
- *Jesus would have no claim to be the son of God had he not been conceived by the Holy Spirit (v35);*
- *Had Mary conceived and born a son by a man out of wedlock, what would that have meant for Jesus?*
- *Jesus's birth and life fulfil many scriptural promises; not least Isaiah 17v4: 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.'*

How fundamental to our faith is the virgin birth? Do we as good protestants underplay its significance?

We will never know why Mary found such favour with God; probably Mary herself never really knew. Have a look now at **Luke 1: 46-55**. Then spend a few minutes speculating on why God might have chosen her for this incredible honour. Thinking about the implications of this news on Mary's life and her response, what we conclude about Mary's character?

Application

Dave left us with four challenges on Sunday. They were that Mary was:

1. Full of faith
2. Full of adventure
3. Full of Godly devotion
4. Full of God's word

Each of these implies total commitment, and we were reminded of the contrast between a quick takeaway pizza and a proper meal; how a quick, easy approach may sustain us for a short time but becomes unhealthy in the long run. How can we follow Mary's example in these areas? Are we committed to doing so? Are we open to being challenged by God? What will be the long-term advantages of such an approach, both for individuals and for the church? Are we up for the challenge?

Further study

If you have time left, it's worth breaking down verses 46-55 and considering it in more detail.

'Mary's Song' is often known today by its Latin title, the 'Magnificat'. It is still sung at every evening service in traditional services (including the daily afternoon Evensong service celebrated in cathedrals everywhere) as it is such a magnificent (no pun intended) song of praise and a great statement of faith.

To help you do this, the Magnificat is broken down into Dave mentioned how well Mary knew her Bible, and some of the Old Testament references in the Magnificat have been highlighted below. You may know of others which are relevant.

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

'My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me –

holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

Mary's response to the wonderful honour God has conferred on her. She acknowledges him as Saviour (he is referred to as Saviour in various places in the Old Testament, eg Ps 18:46, Isaiah 17:10). She realises that God loves humility and He has honoured her humility. She acknowledges who God is: 'the Mighty One, holy is his name'.

v46 summarises Psalm 34: 2-3: 'My soul with boast in the Lord... Glorify the Lord with me'; v48 reflects Ps138:6: 'Though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly; though lofty, he sees them from afar.'

She also reflect Hannah's words from 1 Samuel, when God gave her a son. Both refer to their humble servanthood. And Mary's reaction to God reflects Hannah's in 1 Samuel 2:1:

'My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance.'

Verse 50 shows Mary's understanding of God the saviour and of the place her son will occupy in extending God's mercy: and 'from generation to generation': what a glorious promise to us in our generation!

Ps103: 17: But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children.

Exodus 5: 6: I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as he promised our ancestors.'

Verses 51-53 tell of God's mighty power and how he uses it righteously in his concern for justice and mercy.

Exodus 18:10-11, Jethro (Moses' father-in-law) says: 'Praise be to the Lord, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly.'

Psalm 98: 1: '...his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.'

Isaiah 40: 10: 'See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.'

Psalm 107: 9: 'for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things

Verses 54-55: God is merciful and is true to His promises. Mary as a good Jew would know of God's goodness in rescuing Israel in the Exodus, in his mercy and has great promise to Abraham and all who come after him.

Psalm 98: 3: 'He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.'

Genesis 22: 15-18: 'The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me".'

It's interesting to see how God kept his promise to Abraham because he didn't withhold his son; Mary is aware of how blessed she is, and she too will not withhold her son.