

**A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham on 8 September 2019, the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
by the Revd Eleanor Whalley, Vicar. Revelation 11: 19 – 12: 6, 10; Luke 1: 46-55**

*May I speak and may we hear in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

It's funny, isn't it, how often the readings on a Sunday

fit so well with whatever's going on in the world.

I like to think that's evidence

of the Spirit at work.

A word that's come up frequently in the news these last weeks has been 'chaos':

chaos in government;

chaos at airports and on the railways;

chaos – tragically today – in the Bahamas.

At the vicarage, the contents of my study

seem to have come out in sympathy:

books and papers are everywhere.

A friend looked in my study a few days ago

and she said it looked like I'd been burgled.

I've gone beyond the point where I know where everything is .

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Chaos – disorder – is also there in our readings.

It's there in John's vision in the Book of Revelation:

'flashes of lightning – peals of thunder – an earthquake – a dragon – falling stars...'

Chaos on a cosmic scale -

part of the disorder

that precedes the new order

that Christ will one day come – 'seated on the clouds' - to bring.

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Revelation isn't often read in churches –

I think people think it's too difficult for us vicars to preach on, or too incomprehensible for congregations to hear.

Well, you might think it's a cop out, but I'm not going to preach on Revelation this morning,

but I would encourage you to go away and read it – or re-read it if you've read it before.

I think it's a wonderful book – a sort of bringing together of the whole of the rest of the Bible.

It's not a co-incidence that it's placed at the end.

Our Gospel reading is, I'm guessing, much more familiar.

In my Bible, it's headed 'Mary's Song of Praise' –

to some of us it will be 'the Magnificat'.

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The Magnificat isn't generally associated with order and disorder – at least not in my experience -

and yet what does Mary declare about God:

'He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty...'

In and through the child

Mary carries in her womb

God has ordered things differently –

The proud find themselves in disarray; the mighty are brought low;

the lowly are raised up and the hungry are fed;

the rich are sent away with nothing.

The values and order of God's Kingdom

are a very far cry from the values and order of this world.

This is the new order

Christ has come – and will come again - to bring.

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Apart from the words of our Gospel reading,

Mary gets just two lines in Luke's Gospel.

In the other Gospels, she has a different script,

but in Luke – and all in chapter 1 –

she simply asks a question, gives a response and finally proclaims her song of praise.

Question – response – praise:

In Luke's mind, there's nothing more for Mary to do or to say.

She doesn't speak again in the whole of Luke's Gospel – not once in the remaining 23 chapters.

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I think Luke presents Mary as a model for us –

an example of how to be a disciple –

an example of how to live and to act in accordance with God's will.

First comes a question –

Mary asks a question in response to what she thinks she might've heard as God's unbelievable call:

'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'

Today she might've said 'You're having a laugh' – that's what I hear people say round here.

But Mary receives God's reassurance –

she receives the promise of the gift and the strength of the Spirit.

With that promise, Mary gives her response –

She's ready to fall in line with God purposes,

however the future might unfold:

'Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word'.

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What is asked of Mary is, at its heart, what is asked of all of us.

Every Christian is asked to listen – to question, if we need to –

to listen again, to trust and to obey.

Mary entrusts herself and her future to God.

She allows God to work in her, and through her.

In and of herself, she knows she is nothing.

She knows she can't do it on her own.

Fortunately God knows that too –

as well as receiving the promise of the Spirit,

Mary receives the news that her cousin Elizabeth is in a not dissimilar situation:

'she who was said to be barren is now in her sixth month'

When Mary sings her song, she sings it at Elizabeth's house – that's where she goes – and 'goes with haste' -

once the angel has left her. God has given Mary an earthly companion - a friend to be with her on the journey.

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Mary knows everything depends on God:

She knows nothing is possible, except 'according to God's word'.

And yet nothing is possible either

without with Mary's consent.

If Mary had said no, it would be a different story.

Mary's simple faith -

her acceptance of what God is proposing –

is part of what enables everything else.

That's what Elizabeth recognises; that's what Elizabeth says just before Mary sings her song:

'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord'.

That is the attitude we are called to emulate.

It's the fundamental attitude of a disciple -

as disciples, we are called to believe.

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What Mary does, on the face of it, is a very ordinary thing:

Mary conceives and brings up a child.

The Virgin Birth, dare I say it, really isn't the point –

It's not the point today, and it wasn't the point for Luke.

Luke's point is that Mary believes and does what is asked of her,

and that every disciple is called to do the same.

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I'm reminded of a quote by Jean Vanier.

Jean Vanier was a French-Canadian philosopher who died earlier this year. Jean Vanier founded L'Arche –

communities where people with learning difficulties live together with people like most of us –

people whose disabilities are - for the most part - less obvious.

Jean Vanier said:

"The church is not called to do extraordinary things;

it is called to do ordinary things with extraordinary love."

For Jean Vanier that meant, initially, opening up his home to two men with learning difficulties.

It meant sharing his table and sharing their lives, and sharing his life with them – a very simple thing.

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Whatever the equivalent of that is for us,

we too are called to do ordinary things with great love.

We are called to be heralds of God's new order -

heralds of God's order in our ordinary context –

at home, at work, at school, or still on holiday.

We're called to help establish God's order through our lives and by our prayers,

to establish it in the chaos and confusion of this world.

'Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word'.

May we listen, may we trust, and may we obey

in the simple things of every day.

You can check up on me on this: I'm going to make a start by tidying my study. Amen.

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