

CHRISTMAS EVE - How Do You Feel?

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Preacher: Stephen Hale

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on Christmas Eve 2001. The preacher is Bishop Stephen Hale.

His subject is entitled, How Do You Feel? and is based on Luke chapter 1 verses 46 to 55.

Well first off I'd like to thank Paul for the privilege of preaching here at Holy Trinity on Christmas Eve, which I think is the biggest Christmas service you have, so it's terrific to be here.

And it's also, I know it's not something that Paul does rightly because Paul jealously guards his pulpit, and rightly so of course. So it's great to be here and to have this opportunity to be at Holy Trinity.

And I guess being my first year out of the parish, I guess it's wonderful to have the opportunity to participate in this sort of service, so I was going to miss this sort of thing, so it's very kind of you. Well one of the most irritating phenomena of our age is that thing that happens on a very regular occasion, at sporting and other sorts of events where the great event has taken place, and the victor has won the prize, and just as the person climbs out of the swimming pool or staggers up to the football field, or the jockey dismounts up to the Melbourne Cup, the reporter sticks a microphone into their nose and says, How did it feel?

[1 : 25] And the person gasping often for breath is supposed to come up with some intelligence, and a really helpful or thoughtful response. Normally they're just sort of gasping for breath, and they're bursting to sort of try and get away from the reporters, but they have to go through this process.

And so they usually stumble out something like, Oh, this is terrific, or this is the height of achievements, or there was a thing I've always dreamed of coming true, or some other banal sorts of thing that slips out that the media representatives have treated them into saying.

Well, often I think you feel sorry for people in this situation, don't you? Because it just seems so unfair to ask them at that particular moment to have something reasonable or intelligent to say.

Well, in one sense it's the most inane thing to ask, isn't it? How does it feel in that situation? But in another way it's in a sense the thing we all want to know, isn't it? We all want to sense or grasp something of what their experience has been and how they're feeling at that particular moment.

So we want to know what it's like for Ian Thorpe when he wins another race and breaks another world record. We'd like to know what it's like for Shane Warne when he bowls a few more arm overs and takes a few more wickets.

[2 : 37] And we'd like to be actually knowing what's going on in the lives of Tom and Nicole, the most featured people in the last 12 months in our popular magazines. And we also, in a sense, on a more serious note, would like to know what it feels like for the survivors of September 11th.

And I think maybe all of us this week were touched yet again by that photograph which appeared, I think, in lots and lots of different papers of all those mothers with their babies who were the survivors of September 11th.

Well, how do you feel? It's a very big issue or question in the world in which we currently live. Well, to some extent, all the wonder, I guess, we can all wonder, right, rather, at how Mary felt at the amazing news that struck her on that first Christmas night.

An angel, Gabriel, appears to her personally in the town of Nazareth. And she's a young lady who's betrothed. Somewhat surprisingly, she's to be told, but still a virgin.

Sorry, not surprising. It's not surprising that she's betrothed. I think she probably knew about that. But she was still a virgin and wasn't yet married. And she gets told by the angel that she's been chosen by God because she herself is the favoured one.

[3 : 45] And she's told that you'll be with child, a son, and that child already has a name. His name is Jesus. And he's therefore something special, a very particular child, because his name was to become the one who was the son of the Most High.

And we're told that he will occupy David's throne and he'll have an eternal kingdom on which he will rule and be over forever. Well, Mary's response? Well, unfortunately, there were no media representatives available at the time to coach her and there were no media outlets capturing what she said in a direct sense.

So we don't really know how she felt if she was asked that question. But she gets a very simple and very practical response to this great utterance of prophecy.

She says simply, how will this be? Well, no worries, the angel says, nothing's impossible with God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and overshadow you and you will conceive the child within you and will demonstrate God's greatness because of this mighty act in you becoming a mother through the Holy Spirit.

It's all been preordained and prophesied and you, Mary, are to play a very particular and special part in the outworking of God's eternal plan.

[5 : 03] Well, Mary's response again is very simple and very striking. She says, I am the Lord's servant. May this be to me as you have said. That's an amazing response, isn't it?

It's so simple and yet so, I think, amazing. It's so humble and so unassuming. And in a real sense, there's a recognition there of her particular and unique role in the outworking of God's will.

And there's a genuine acceptance of God's work and will and way in her life. I am the Lord's servant. May this be to me as you have said.

Well, what can we learn from Mary as this, I guess, very simple reflection I want to bring tonight? I believe there's a really simple but profound truth which is important for all of us from what we see in Mary's response.

There could be no great act of God without the cooperation of a human servant. There could be no great act of God without the cooperation of a human servant.

[6 : 06] You see, there'd be no Christmas story, would there? And there'd be no virgin birth and there'd be no baby in a manger and there'd be no royal birth if it wasn't for the willing cooperation of Mary.

She had to cooperate, didn't she? She had to enter into and be a part of the process of that great story being unfolded and brought to reality. So, her response goes from, How will this be?

to, May this be done to me as you have said. In other words, she's saying, Bring it on. Let it happen. Whatever you want, God, I'm willing to be a part of that great act taking place.

I'm willing to cooperate with you in this big act that you want to enact. Well, suppose we could speculate on what would have happened if she'd said no to Gabriel. She might have suggested in a contemporary sort of way, Well, I'm far too busy to cooperate in this great act of God.

She might have said, Oh, this would be incredibly embarrassing because I'm still a virgin. So I don't want to be a part of this process. She could have said, Well, it all sounds incredibly inconvenient. So I don't think I'll be involved at present.

[7 : 13] Well, she might have said, No way. I don't think I'm going to be personally fulfilled by this action. After all, it's my choice, isn't it? Which is a very particular reference and idea in our age as well.

In a Lunik cartoon last year, he captured something, I guess, of what things can be like today. He has this cartoon which I can't show you, of course, but which you can imagine there are some shepherds sitting outside under the stars on Christmas Eve, washing their socks.

It says, While shepherds washed their socks by night all seated on the ground, the angel of the Lord came down and no one looked around. Well, they were too busy, weren't they, to take it all in and too busy to be a part of what God was trying to do.

Well, fortunately for Mary, the facts are pretty simple, isn't it? God spoke, she was a willing cooperator with God and because of her cooperation, an amazing miracle and a significant act took place.

Well, she sings a song to capture how she feels about this amazing experience that has to come upon her. She says, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant and from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me and holy is his name.

[8 : 39] You see, Mary cooperates with God so he can do his great work and she gets all of the benefits we can see from her song. She's blessed, she knows the hand of God in her life in a very immediate and tangible way.

She's experienced God doing great things in her and through her and God is therefore honoured through her actions. And this brings us back, I think, to that little simple principle that I've sought to enunciate.

There can be no great act of God without human cooperation. You see, God can do it all himself, can't he? He doesn't have to cooperate with us as people. God's able through just speaking your word or through the movement of his hands to act powerfully and all-powerfully.

But in fact, God chooses to work in and through people, whether it's Mary or you or me. That's the way God chooses to act. He, in a sense, chooses to limit himself in some respects, but in other ways it's no limitation at all, to actually do his work in and through people.

And that same principle that applied to Mary, I want to suggest, applies to us. So, the big question for you and for me is, are we willing to cooperate and are we cooperating with God to experience his great work in our lives?

[9 : 57] Are you cooperating with God so that you can experience his great work in your life? Am I cooperating with God so I can experience the same thing? The way it works is that God takes the initiative, as he did with Mary, and actually speaks to us.

And one of the great privileges we have living in the era in which we live is that God's word is still freely available to us. And in a church like this, it's faithfully preached and taught so that we can know God fully.

And as God takes the initiative to speak and to communicate with us, we have to ask ourselves, how are we responding? As I enter into a new phase of my ministry, am I living as a life, a life rather which is dependent upon God?

Am I involved in an active relationship with God? Or am I a person who's just a sort of a religious functionary, playing church, but with no real meaning? Well, there's some important questions for me.

But what about you? And what about in your life? Are you someone who's cooperating with God in your life? Because God can't do any great act in your life unless you cooperate.

[11 : 02] He couldn't do a great act in Mary's life if she wasn't prepared to cooperate with him. And because she was obedient, and because she was willing to go along with what God had suggested, as amazing as it may have seemed, and in a sense as threatening as it may have seemed, she experienced the greatness of God.

And she was therefore able to testify and to magnify how great God was. This Christmas, I want you to think a little bit about whether you're cooperating with God or not.

Because if you want to experience his greatness in your life, if you want to have an immediate and tangible sense of who God is and how great he can be to bring about change in your life, then you need to cooperate, just as I do.

So this Christmas, cooperate with God. Allow him to do a great work in your life. And then you yourself, like Mary, will be able to say that you're blessed because you've experienced his greatness and his hand in your life.

Let's pray as we reflect on these few words. Gracious God, we thank you for the obedience of Mary to your word. We thank you that she was willing to take some huge risks in order to be obedient to you.

[12 : 15] We thank you that as she did that, she recognised how blessed she was. And we pray, Father, that in our lives, that she'd help us to be people who cooperate with you, to be people who are seeking to be obedient to your word, and to be attentive to the initiative that you take to reach out to us so that we can enter into a real and living relationship with you.

And we pray as we seek to listen to you and to be obedient to you as Mary was, and to cooperate with you in our lives, that we indeed might experience your greatness and as well as that be blessed.

And we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.