

Mary, Mother of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] A very good morning to you and also Happy New Year. We are only a few days into January and it is a real delight to be here today. I know many of you here. I've been a member here for quite a long time. I think I'm heading not far off 20 years, but it is a great joy to be here. I'm also on staff here, so a lot of you will know me in a far more operational capacity than what you see me here today.

In fact, you won't know me in this capacity at all. I am definitely a case of a long time listener, first time speaker. I emphasise a little bit with Mary today as I have slightly been placed in the spotlight, so to say. So thank you very much for that, Steve. I appreciate that.

But in all seriousness, though, it is actually a joy and a privilege to be asked to speak on Mary, Jesus' mother. And I hopefully will encourage you all, and Mary will encourage us all, to be inspired by her faith in what we'll see as really quite scandalous circumstances.

So let's begin by having a little bit of a look about who Mary is. Mostly, we think of Mary at Christmas, don't we? We might see her in a nativity. I grab this from my nativity scene at home.

That's generally where we might see Mary. We don't even really see her much in the shops anymore. Every now and again, you might see a little bit of a nativity scene. But generally, this is what we think of when we think of Mary.

[1 : 3 3] Mary. She's very much part of Christmas. And in fact, the Bible doesn't give us a lot of specific information about who Mary actually was in terms of a biography.

Of course, the spotlight and the gospel tends to be more focused on her son, Jesus, and rightly so. And we don't actually hear anything about Mary until Gabriel, the angel, comes and speaks to her.

Some things we do now about Mary is that she was a Jewish woman. She was probably born around 20 BC in Nazareth, in Galilee. And she would have been living in the first century Roman Empire.

As a Jewish woman of this particular time, her path in life would have already been planned out for her. When we very first meet her, she's actually engaged to Joseph. And she probably wouldn't have been much more than 15, which is not very old.

I have a daughter who's 15, so this story blows my mind every day. As a Jew, Mary would have been taught about and learnt to memorise the Hebrew Scriptures, which is also known as our Old Testament now.

[2 : 4 1] Jewish people had to know Scripture. They had to commit it to their hearts and their minds. They knew it inside and back to front. So she would have known about the promised Messiah. Mary is mentioned a few other times in the New Testament, but without much more insight as to who she is as a person.

One key moment worth mentioning is at the wedding in Cana, where Jesus turns water into wine. In John chapter 2. This event is actually quite a significant turning point in the relationship that Mary has with her son, Jesus.

She shifts a bit from being his mother. She continues to be still his mother, but she takes on more of a discipleship and a follower role as he turns water into wine and brings on some miracles in his life.

Mary was also at Jesus' crucifixion. And we do know that she was still alive when the new church began, and we can see that in Acts chapter 1. After this time, there's no other mention of her in the Bible at all.

We know that Mary had other children, such as James, who went on to lead the early church in Jerusalem. And while we don't have a lot of details about Mary's life, we know a lot more about her than we do about her husband, Joseph, which is incredibly significant and very unusual in this patriarchal society.

[4 : 06] As the most significant woman in the early Christian movement, quite a lot of speculation and legend has surrounded her. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that Mary was sinless.

And as someone sinless, they teach that she would have been bodily raised into heaven before she neared death. And for some, she's actually even more significant than Jesus to the Christian faith.

She is prayed to as the mother who has the ear of her son and can therefore intercede on behalf of those who pray for her, pray to her. However, if the Bible is our authority in these matters, and here at St. Paul's the Bible is, we hold fast to the truth that the Bible is the word of God here, then there's no explicit evidence or even implied assumptions that this is the case for Mary.

The Bible encourages us to have a very realistic picture of who Mary was. She was a human in every way, just like we were. She's not to be elevated to any kind of demigod status.

Mary is an engaged teenage peasant girl of Jewish heritage from a backwater nothing village in Galilee. She has absolutely no social standing, and she is well on her way to disappearing into a life of obscurity, just like most of us.

[5 : 29] And then everything changed. Our Mary of history is thrust into the spotlight, and her life takes a substantial shift. So let's have a look at what her life might have looked like as it takes a turn.

Everything changed when she had a visit from an angel. This angel has informed her that she is going to have a baby. Now normally that would be a very exciting time. It's a moment of excitement, it's a moment of joy.

You probably want to go share it with everybody that you know. And perhaps this was actually Mary's hope after she and Joseph settled down. Instead, Mary finds herself deep in the middle of a...

Because this baby is going to be born out of wedlock. I just want to paint a little bit of a picture for you as what this might look like in Mary's day and in her society.

Women in this culture who had children out of marriage could at the very best carry a very unpleasant stench-like stigma around with them for the rest of their life. Or at worst, it could actually bring physical danger, possibly even death.

[6 : 35] And would also extend to their husbands as well as probably their extended family. We see in Matthew 1 that even Joseph had decided to break off the engagement. He knew that if he married her, then they and their families would be shunned, and they'd always be suspected in their shame and honour society.

So for her to accept this situation that the angel has presented, Mary knew that for the rest of her life, she would be stigmatised as that woman.

And there is no indication as her life went on that this speculation or this gossip ever would have left her. It's not like everybody believed that Jesus was God's incarnate, and so Mary carried the stigma of being an unfaithful woman for her whole life.

Who was going to believe a pregnant peasant teenage girl that God made her pregnant? And who was even going to believe an older woman, her relative Elizabeth, that the Holy Spirit made her pregnant?

So just to add to this stigma in Mary's life, she also had the issue of being the mother of Jesus. I'm going to say that to raise the Son of God is probably going to bring about a fairly substantial amount of pressure.

[7 : 53] So after the scandal surrounding his birth, it is likely that many people around Mary would not have been very warm or welcoming as her life went on, because as Jesus grew older and throughout his life and throughout his ministry, Mary would have experienced speculation and disdain over many of Jesus' claims.

And I think it's also helpful to remember that she was a normal human mother. She had normal feelings and she had normal emotions, and yet she was raising a perfect, sinless child.

When Jesus was 12, his family was returning to Nazareth from Jerusalem after the Passover feast. A full day after leaving, they realised that Jesus was not with them.

They lost the Son of God. And they took three days to find him. Now, if you are a parent or a carer of a child in any way, and you haven't laid eyes on them for a few minutes, you may know the feeling.

The feeling of initial stress building up, to panic a little while after. Even if it's just a few minutes, it feels like hours. One of my children used to go and hide underneath the clothing racks when we were in the shops and couldn't find them.

[9 : 08] Zach, where are you? Can't find you. But eventually you find them. When you do, there comes this feeling of relief, but there is also this irritation, frustration that's going on as well.

So you can imagine the frustration that Mary must have felt and how distressed she would have been after three days. So when they eventually located him back in the temple, she said, Son, why have you treated us like this?

Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you. Mary was hurt by what appeared to be the carelessness and the selfishness of Jesus. And while Jesus tried to explain to her, she actually at this stage still didn't understand.

There were many times that Mary had to deal with the frustration of taking second place in Jesus' life. Matthew tells us of a time where she arrived at the house where he was teaching and the crowd was so large that she had to stand outside the house and just be patient and just wait quietly.

There were many times that she just had to wait quietly while his ministry unfolded. And probably the worst for a mother, she experienced the grief and the horror of watching her son tortured and killed by crucifixion, the most horrendous way of death.

[10 : 31] In so many ways, Mary had to let go of what she treasured so much in her son Jesus so that he could fulfil God's mission. Mary was unexpectedly thrust into the spotlight over 2,000 years ago and she is still in the spotlight today despite us not knowing very much about her.

We've just celebrated Christmas. Seems like a million years ago. It was only a couple of weeks. Around half of the world's population celebrate Christmas. It's the most widely celebrated holiday in the whole world.

More than 160 countries declare it a holiday season. So Christmas is big. But it started very, very small. It started with a teenage girl in a nondescript town in the Middle East.

And what the angel told Mary was a message that had been foretold for many years. This teenage girl was the very first person to get the message that the long-promised great salvation would come into this world through a baby born in Bethlehem and that his name would be Jesus.

This Jesus is Lord of the Universe descending into time and into space to save humanity. Mary is the very first person to hear the good news in the form that we have it today and it's pretty incredible that our model for belief in Jesus is a teenage girl, an unwed peasant teenage mother.

[12 : 00] Mary is still in the spotlight today not just because she is the mother of the most influential person in history, but because of how she responded to him. And this is where we might see, this is where we see Mary's steadfast faith.

With all that Mary was navigating from such a young age and right through her life, her faith is quite remarkable. Mary's first response to the angel is a healthy doubt.

The assumption of many of our day is that religious people just don't ask questions. They just have a blind faith and they just turn their minds off. But this is not what Mary did and it's not what we should do either.

When the angel showed up and greeted Mary, we're told in Luke 1 of Mary's response. It says, Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

Now to be clear, I have not studied any ancient languages at all. However, as I worked on this talk, I had a privilege of doing a bunch of research and reading. And during this time, a helpful point that I came across was that this word in the passage, wondered, in its original language, is an accounting word.

[13 : 13] It means to take an audit. It's a rational word. It means taking stock or weighing up arguments. And I felt it's important to clarify because when the angel showed up and Mary started to ask questions, her response is very thoughtful and it's very considered.

It's the heart and it's the head working together. She has her doubts. She's asking questions. And this is so important because we can often assume that these ancient people are a little more ignorant than us modern people.

In our modern arrogance, we just assume that former generations and ages were superstitious and that they believed anything. And yet, people back then had the same kind of IQs that we do now.

They could think. Mary is responding in the same way that we would if an angel showed up and started talking to us. The difference between them back then and us now is that we have been trained not to believe in the supernatural at all.

But Mary, as a Jew, had been taught not to think that God could possibly be human at all. And so be assured that the barriers that Mary faced for belief back then are just as big as the ones that we face today.

[14 : 34] But a combination of evidence and experience can shatter those barriers. It's interesting earlier in the chapter that an angel appeared to announce another miraculous birth.

this time to Zechariah who was the father of John the Baptist. Now Zechariah also asks questions and he is very doubtful. The angel ends up striking him mute and he can't speak until his son is born.

Mary's response to the angel is very similar but the angel blesses her and leaves. So what is that all about? Did Zechariah get a grumpy angel and Mary's was in a better mood?

Not at all but what we have is the Bible's nuance on the issue of doubt. The Bible doesn't present doubt as being all bad or all good.

There's a kind of doubt that is a sign of a closed mind and a kind of doubt that is a sign of an open mind. One kind wants answers and the other doesn't.

[15 : 42] Mary's doubt is the kind that wants answers. She is absolutely willing to get out of the driver's seat of her own life if she can be shown that the truth is other than what she thought.

Zechariah's doubt was using questions as a way to stay in control of his life. Mary's doubt finally led to what we might call a cautious surrender.

Her words in Luke 1.38 are great. It says, I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered, may your word to me be fulfilled. She knows what she's being called into.

She's about to have a child. Even if Joseph stays with her, people will be able to add it up. They had calendars. She lived in a traditional paternalistic society.

She knew she would always be seen as the bearer of an illegitimate child. child. She was about to begin a life of disgrace and she says, I'll take it.

[16 : 48] I could only imagine that she was cautious but it was a surrender. When the angel said that she was going to give birth to a child and you will call his name Jesus, Mary knew right away that something significant was going on.

Mary didn't get to do what is normal and right for a parent to do. She didn't get to choose the child's name. In every other normal case, the father and the mother have authority over the child.

It is their right to name the child but not this child. If Jesus were to come into Mary's life or into our life, he would be in charge.

He names us. We don't name him. He calls the shots for us. We don't call the shots for him. Mary says, I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.

Mary knows she is taking her hands off her own life and she is taking Jesus into her arms. Her surrender was willing and it was joyful even if it was cautious.

[17 : 54] She doesn't do it under duress. In fact, Mary heads off to visit her cousin Elizabeth. We see from verse 36 that she is miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist.

When the pregnant Mary arrives at Elizabeth's house, John leaps inside of Elizabeth. While Mary is visiting her relative here, it is actually a meeting of the two children.

Even as an unborn baby, John acknowledges that someone greater is in the room, so to speak. Elizabeth confirms to Mary that in fact Mary is carrying the Son of God.

She says, blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me? And at this point, Mary overflows with joy that God's promised Son and Rescuer is coming into the world and she breaks out in song.

I'm not going to sing. It is a song that declares God is true to his promises. He is a merciful God. He is a powerful God.

[19 : 04] He is a God who turns the values of the world on their head by favouring the poor, the hungry and the lowly. So what can we take away from Mary here?

Why are we looking at Mary now after Christmas? This poor teenage girl at the bottom of the first century social ladder is now known by the vast majority of people who ever lived.

Not because she made herself great but because she humbled herself and she surrendered to the one infinitely greater. What is even more amazing is that she did this before she knew what the greater one was going to do for her.

The Easter events tell us that everything Mary did for Jesus, Jesus had done for Mary but by infinite measure. We're told later in the New Testament that though Jesus is the creator, God of the universe, he humbled himself and he became a servant for all.

He went lower than anyone before him. He became the baby of the lowest. The God whose power and might created the universe was cradled in the arms of the teenager that he made.

[20 : 31] This God took his hands off his life. Just before his execution, his prayer to his father was, not my will but yours be done.

Just like Mary said. As we head into 2025, as we think of our own faith in God, as we consider the depth of our relationship with Jesus, this side of the cross in the 21st century, may we not fall lower or fall short of the faith that this first century unwed, peasant teenage mother from Palestine.

We have more resources than Mary did. We live this side of Jesus. We have Easter. We have the ultimate reason to follow in Mary's footsteps. Mary didn't have the benefit of knowing that her son would die.

that he would be resurrected and that he would repair the broken relationship between humanity and our creator God. We have that benefit. We have the benefit of God's gift to us over 2,000 years ago.

We have the evidence of Jesus' death and his resurrection and we have the evidence of his promise to this world fulfilled. We are able to see Jesus being a great servant.

[21 : 49] we have God's goodness. We have his kindness, his infinite generosity. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit. Mary believed the angel when he said in verse 37 that with God nothing is impossible.

A poor 15-year-old near the bottom of the social ladder knew that if she surrendered to God she would fall even lower. yet her faith, her trust and her deep love of God allowed her to accept his plan.

She humbled herself and she became a servant and she sings. In this scandalous situation, unsure situation, she breaks out in song and she spends time praising God.

and for 2,000 years she has been celebrated as blessed. The way of greatness is the way of the humble surrender to the infinitely great one.

So this year, as you consider your next step, please treasure Jesus. Open your heart and your mind.

[23 : 09] Echo the words of Mary over every aspect of your life. Let it be done according to your will. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.