

Fourth Sunday in Advent 18 December 2011

'Let it be with me according to your word'. Luke 1.38

When it comes to the Blessed Virgin Mary, us non-Roman Catholics Christians often feel we are skating on thin ice and so we just gloss over the whole subject. We are too scared to question whether Mary is really the "Mother-of-God" or theotokos to give its Greek name; whether Mary was forever a virgin; whether we should honour Mary more than any other saint, whether we should see her as our redemtrix as Jesus is our redeemer? The more I've thought about it the more I've come to realise that God does not particularly bless the gullible and compliant. God is not interested in us accepting the virgin birth as historical fact, or lots of other things, when one doesn't believe such things are possible. I believe that our faith has to be compatible with our intellect. There is nothing especially meritorious about having 'blind' faith. Remember Jesus regularly accused the orthodox and the devout of his time of being 'blind'. It helps no one at all if we believe the unbelievable. Too often believing the unbelievable actually alienates a multitude of other people who don't.

Now, I am a head person. I like logical and reasoned argument. I love to explore both sides of an argument before coming to a logical conclusion. But what can happen to people like me is that once we have reached a conclusion then we will argue for that position 'come hell or high water'. We think in terms of opposites; 'you're in' or 'you're out'; 'You're guilty' or 'you're innocent'; 'You're saved' or 'you're damned'; 'This is orthodoxy' or 'this is heresy'.

But as I read this morning's gospel, I started to think... Why did God choose Mary? Surely it would have been better to choose a mature, logical thinking woman to be the Christ-bearer? But that is not the way God chose and chooses. God chose a very young girl, and chose her, not to become logical or well-reasoned or wise, but to be a mother. Not being a mother was something that few girls of that day and age would have even considered possible, let alone desirable. Unfortunately, we today might miss the complete ordinariness of Mary's call. God was asking a young girl to do a perfectly normal thing - to bare a child.

So Mary's ministry wasn't to be fulfilled by becoming religious. Mary's vocation wasn't to be fulfilled by her becoming celibate, even though later generations of supposedly celibate males ordained that this was actually so. Mary's ministry wasn't to be fulfilled by her becoming someone **out of** the ordinary. Mary's ministry was fulfilled by her **being** ordinary. She was to be an ordinary person like any 16 year old girl of those times. And the child she was to bear fulfilled his ministry by being ordinary too, no different a person to the ordinary run of the mill of human being of his day.

We celebrate a God found in the ordinary things of life, not one hidden away in books, buildings, sages or gurus. What is that famous quote, "we commemorate a God who died on a cross between two thieves not on an altar between two silver candlesticks"? We celebrate a God found in the ordinary things of life by ordinary people, not just those who have had particular conversion experiences, who have spent their lives studying theology, or who have spent their lives on their knees. We celebrate a God found in ordinary people, not those who believe particular things, like the virgin birth, creation rather than evolution, the literal historicity of each and every word of the Bible, the necessity of calling on God by a particular name (naturally using Elizabethan English), or worshipping God in a particular manner such as hands in the air or not.

The Angel Gabriel came from God to Mary and her response was, 'let it be with me according to your word'. But who is this God who comes to us ordinary people like Mary? A god who comes to include **us** and thus alienate others? Or a God who includes us **along** with all others? The angel came to Mary, essentially a child, and she was not forced, she was given choice. The angel came to a young girl and engaged her in conversation. Notice there was neither anything about 'children are to be seen and not heard' here nor anything about women remaining silent. When Mary questioned how it might be accomplished, she is not rebuked, like the elderly high priest Zechariah. The angel treats her question seriously. She is allowed to doubt and to wonder. RPT

It seems to me that such a God as this is worth putting oneself out for. God brings no personal status, and it bodes well for the future. It will be a future certainly different from the past, as the world is an entirely different place now than it was for Jesus. Simply to return to the past as if it were something better, achieves nothing for those of us who live in the present and those who look to a better future.

What we need is the assurance of God present in the here and now, and in the times to come, and for me this is what God also desires. It is done through you and me, being present in this world, and in us seeing God in the other, in the ordinary. 'Let it be with me according to your word' is the word of affirmation that we too need to give to God our allegiance, as the one who blesses others as well as us.

In Luke's Gospel Mary goes on to enunciate a socio-religious agenda in her *Magnificat*: "God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 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." These words remains relevant to this day because in this socio-political agenda of recognising the divine in others, not just in males but females as well, not just in the wisdom of the aged, but in the young as well, not just in religion and orthodoxy but in secular society all around us as well, continues to this day. And the gospel is, that we do these things when we too, say with Mary: 'let it be with **me** according to your word'.