

The angel appeared to a woman in a town in Galilee called Nazareth. So!!!

We can visit Nazareth today. What is it like? (PPT)

The town of over 60,000 people - the largest Palestinian city in Israel. Over 70% of the population are Muslims. About 20% are Christians with the majority being Greek Orthodox. Protestants are very much in the minority.

In Nazareth you can visit the Church of the Annunciation (Franciscan) with copper detail and relief work on the doors emphasising international peace.

Inside are banners, tapestries from all over the world depicting Mary and Christ. (PPT)

The church is intended to be a place of reconciliation for all the Christian traditions.

In Nazareth there are tensions between Arab Muslims and Christians, some of whom have been forced to leave Nazareth and live elsewhere.

In the time of Jesus, Nazareth's population might have been a couple of hundred people. The Nazareth of today may seem very different from the one 2000 years ago yet there are similarities - Still political tensions. Still the divisions between races and beliefs. Still a hard road for women whose identity continues to depend on having a husband and children, especially sons.

Luke tells us that the angel had also appeared to Zechariah, father of John the Baptist with extraordinary news.....

The angel Gabriel appeared to a young woman in a town called Nazareth with a message of grace.

The announcement to Mary was to her puzzling, perplexing: "Rejoice, highly favoured one! The Lord is with you."

Reiterated in word plays in the Greek text is grace. "Hail Graced One!" "You have found grace with God."

What would this woman have had to rejoice about in her everyday reality? really? We don't really know because in the biblical text we are not told, but most likely she was

- A young girl.
- Rural life. What lay ahead for most girls her age?
- Not just any rural life but coming from Nazareth. The disciples were asked 'can anything good come from Nazareth?' In the hills, hard to grow crops, pasture land.
- Marriage at 12 or 13. Lots of children.
- Hard work in Galilee - not the favoured place of the Roman Empire. Hotbed of sedition.

And yet this young girl has perhaps insight and maturity beyond her years, in contrast to Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, Mary holds no official position among the people. She is not described as righteous in terms of observing the Torah. Her experience of God's messenger does not take place in a religious setting.

She is among the most powerLESS people in her society.

- She is young in a world which values AGE.

- She is a female in a world ruled by MEN.
- She is poor in a stratified economy.
- She has neither husband nor child to validate her existence.

We don't know who her father or brother is. That SHE should have found favour with God and be highly gifted shows Luke's understanding of the nature of God. Many traditions in order to venerate Mary have added to her esteem by declaring that she herself was immaculately conceived that she was pure by virtue of her lack of sexuality, was sinless etc. I do not hold that it is necessary to hold such views. More consistent with the OT view of God is that He makes remarkable and very unpredictable choices at times in terms of upon whom his favour or Grace rests. Yet again the lineage is clearly there to be traced right back throughout the pages of biblical history.

The promise to Mary is that she shall bear a son - whose name means "Emmanuel" = GOD IS WITH YOU.

But what kind of a son? The child is to be the Messiah, the long-awaited descendant of David who will restore the glories of David's Kingdom and usher in a period of freedom, prosperity and peace for Israel. These were normal, conventional expectations of the Messiah. That promise we heard in Psalm 89. But a Messiah born among the marginalised. Surely not!

Mary reacts strongly to the announcement. There is total disbelief and questioning of the message: To bear a King? A threat to the existing powers when she is young and betrothed. (a stronger agreement than our understanding of engagement today) Betrothal meant that Mary was incorporated legally into the line of Joseph, the descendant of King David. The legal act of betrothal was very important. Virgins who lost their betrothed before marriage were regarded as widows. The significance of Jesus is announced even before his birth.

He has a lot to live up to. Even before he has uttered a syllable the church has learnt that he is someone who will make a real difference. His career is laid out in extravagant terms. Here will be one greater even than John the Baptist - identified quite clearly with God.

The virgin birth served originally to emphasise the uniqueness of Christ. For Luke what is important is the grace and favour of the Word of God that is able to bring forth life out of nothing.

Possibly both Matthew and Luke received traditions of the illegitimacy of Jesus and transmitted it very differently. Both stress that the child is Messiah and holy, in spite or because of his origins.

An audience familiar with stories of miraculous conceptions of heroes and immortals would think either of divine and human paternity or of the divine mating with the virgin (sacred marriage). Greek readers were familiar with those sorts of stories. By contrast the Jewish traditions would not be prepared to think of virginal conception. In those traditions, divine paternity did not replace **human paternity**.

Mary is to name the child. She is the receiver of the promise. She is not bearing a child **for** her husband. **Mary is to function as a prophet**. "The Holy Spirit will come over you".

In the same way Luke spoke about the Spirit descending upon the group of disciples gathered in the upper room in Acts 1

Mary is filled with the Holy Spirit - a creative, life-giving Spirit that is introducing a new act on the part of God - like the act of creation depicted in Gen 1. God is doing something new! **This is an act of grace**. It's not a particular reward for a righteous life, although Mary is praised for her belief. She has no need of a sign or proofs, unlike Zechariah father of John the Baptist, who asked for a sign and became mute.

Mary is urged to trust.

Is she however, just a passive character? "I am the handmaid of the Lord". Is she just a submissive female? Is this an endorsement of a patriarchal model of female inferiority, dependence and helplessness?

Notion of slavery is not a positive one. This remains something of a difficulty for modern readers of the Gospel story. But others were also referred to as slaves of God. Moses, Abraham, David, Isaac, the prophets, Jacob and Hannah. Even Jesus himself claimed to be among them as "one who serves". The female slaves in Acts at the end times would prophecy.

The prophetic spirit comes through Mary's Song of Praise, the Magnificat, which we are about to hear in song.

A marvellous song of liberation. A challenge issued to the existing structures of power and oppression. She declares God to be the one who bypasses those at the centre of power in favour of the lowly and marginalised. All the verbs are in the past tense -It is something to be claimed here and now. The Magnificat concludes with an invitation to Mary's Community and the church to join her in making this experience of liberation and salvation their own.

What is Luke's message?

It is an affirmation about the way God acts and continues to act.

For Zechariah and Mary to respond to God's extraordinary announcements, required more than ordinary reserves of faith and trust. God is being generous. They are **invited to be generous in receiving the gifts of God**.

The old cultural barriers of age and sterility, youth and virginity have been overturned.

Luke tells us that *God is always acting, but often in surprising and paradoxical ways.*
The ways of God often reverse human expectations.

You and I are invited to reflect on the ways of *God in the world - in our hearts and minds, our families and communities, our churches and neighbourhoods.* We are invited to be on the lookout for the *God who makes all things new, in often surprising ways.*

May *God be with you. Emmanuel.* And may you see the unimaginable transpire by the *Spirit of God who makes all things possible.*