

Sermon on Wednesday 21 December 2022

by Rev. Bill Church

(Readings: Isaiah 7.10-14 & Luke 1.26-36)

Mary

This week we light the fourth candle in the Advent wreath, for Mary.

Luke's Gospel includes two annunciations, by the angel Gabriel, of unexpected births, and carefully contrasts them.

The first is to Zechariah, a man and a priest, in Jerusalem, in the Temple. The announcement is of GOOD news, the birth of a longed-for son. But Zechariah does not trust Gabriel (who strikes him dumb!).

The second is to Mary, a woman and, as far as we know, of no special status, at her home, in Nazareth, an unimportant town in a region despised by many. And it is of BAD news. The appearance of a child would cause difficulties, to say the least, with her fiancé Joseph; and would involve disgrace in the town, and perhaps penalties under the law.

But Mary does trust Gabriel, showing her obedience to God: "I am the handmaid of the Lord."

Mary's obedience was a necessary condition for the incarnation. There is, frustratingly, little further material in the Gospels about Mary.

She and Jesus' brothers worried about Jesus' ministry.

She was at the cross.

She, with Jesus's brothers, was a member of the earliest church.

Mary is held in great honour. In England, she is by far the most popular patron saint of parish churches. The Church in the Middle Ages got rather carried away with overplaying devotion to her, to the extent of making her almost super-natural. That was wrong. It is important to remember that she was wholly human. The Christian doctrine is that Jesus was divine but also fully human. His humanity came through Mary and through Mary being fully human, being mortal like you and me. And the Gospels record that Mary later became the mother of many more children.

She was, especially for women, really "One of us".

But she was brave enough to accept the great privilege and risk and burden of carrying the Son of God - who was also, of course, her son and on whose account a sword pierced her heart, as Simeon foretold.

In the Gospels, the last recorded words of Mary, said to the servants at the Wedding at Cana are: "Do whatever he tells you", just as she had done what God told her. A good precept for us all: "Do whatever he tells you."