

CHRISTMAS DAY 2022

Isaiah 52. 7-10

Hebrews 1. 1-4

Matthew 1. 18-25

In the Eastern Church, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is known as the *theotokos* – an ancient Greek word meaning the God bearer. It reminds us that Mary in her pregnancy was not just bearing any new life but the very life of God as it came into the world in Jesus. Theotokos – God bearer. It reminds of the scaredness of Mary's part in the Jesus story – her bringing of the Christ-child is emblematic for us; pattern for us of what it might mean for the Christ to come to birth in us.

What strikes me about Mary and of Joseph– especially in today's Gospel which centres around Joseph – is the audacity of this couple. This is a courageous couple. We are reminded of Mary's courage in her defiant prayer from the Gospel of Luke – the Magnificat:

... my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
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.

We know of Mary's defiance, but we easily overlook the courage of Joseph, not really understanding the implication of what he does in this very brief birth narrative from Matthew. Mary and Joseph are to all intents and purposes married – although they are not yet actually living together. There will have been an elaborate marriage ceremony and if the families have some assets there will have been a dowry exchange. So, this news that Mary is pregnant is a profound scandal. Under the law and by custom, Joseph can rightly divorce Mary, as it becomes apparent that she is pregnant. Indeed, the law provides for her to be stoned to death. But Joseph, we are told, is a righteous and kindly man and so plans to dismiss her quietly. His intention to dismiss Mary seems quite benign, but in truth this is a scandalous, truly life and death situation. The society Jesus is born into could be compared to the kind of hyper-religious world that is present day Iran or Afghanistan. The lot of women is highly prescribed and restricted.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus' life is under threat from the very beginning: the possibility that Joseph could dismiss Mary quietly – and so abandon her to the bristling piety of an angry mob eager to stone her; Herod's determination to eradicate any threat to his kingship and so murder all the children under two years of age around Bethlehem; attempts to stone Jesus during his ministry and ultimately to Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

As always throughout the scriptures, as the angel appears to Joseph in the dream, angels come with the divine greeting: Fear not! Do not be afraid! To Joseph in his dire situation: Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. This divine *fear not* is an invitation to live boldly, audaciously, courageously, and without shame. Truly Mary's plight is cause for life-threatening social shame. But she defies this and becomes the *Theotokos*, the bearer of God. And Joseph as protector and defender of Mary creates the climate in which the Christ-child may grow.

And so Mary becomes the bearer of the one who becomes Good News for the world. As Matthew quotes the words of the prophet that the child will be Emmanuel, God with us we hear an echo of the prophet Isaiah:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,

who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

This notion of bringer of Good News, bearer of the life of God, is an image for us of who we may become. It is the gift of the spirit, the inspiration of the spirit of God that we might also be God bearers, bringers of good news; this is what the Gospel calls us to be: to be light in the darkness, bringers of the compassion and lovingkindness of God; bringers of healing and wholeness – continuing to incarnate the life of God.

The invasion of Ukraine this year has set the world back on its feet. So many have asked in one way or another: how did this happen? We thought we were past all of this kind of calamity in the world; over the domination of others by psychopaths. A shroud of darkness seems to have been cast over us and so many consequences are flowing from this war, the most heart-wrenching being the murder of thousands of Ukrainian people, the exodus of so many from their country and the destruction of so many Ukrainian cultural icons, expressions of their identity. But their response is courageous, audacious, a cry of: we will not be subdued. Their defiance is incandescent. They are not prepared for their identity to be snuffed out.

This incandescence is reflective of the incandescence of Mary and of Joseph; that they will not allow the image of God in them – and in the child that Mary bears – to be erased. They will bear the Good News that Christ will bring.

Christmas is a reminder for us that we may all be God bearers, maybe not in the way Mary was but the mystery of the presence of God's spirit and the promise of the gospel is that we all may be God bearers and bringers of Good News. When we pray, your kingdom come, on earth as it is in Heaven, it is a prayer that we might be the bearers of the life of heaven on earth, in the pattern of Jesus.

- The kingdom comes into being in the things we do as we bring in word and action the life of God to others
- It comes in the denial of shame as a crippling restraint on our lives, recognising that the shame Mary might have been subjected to, could not snuff out the life of God. We can live with this freedom and lift the mantle of crippling shame from others too.
- It comes into the world in hope which we bear for each other when we find ourselves in places which seem to be without hope.
- it comes in defiance in the face of oppression, seeking to erase the image of God in each of us.
- It comes in bearing the love of God into situations where there seems to be none.

The writer to the Hebrews says that Jesus – God's anointed one - sustains all things by his powerful word. Our calling as disciples, as those walking in the pattern of Jesus, is to be bearers of this powerful word, messengers who announce peace, bringers of good news and announcers of salvation. May God give us ears to hear his word and for us and like Mary and Joseph to be audacious, courageous and joyful in the spirit of Christ which we bear.

May it be so

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