

Advent 4 – Mary

2 Samuel 7:1-11,16
Romans 16:25-end
Luke 1:26-38

I wonder if you remember those sets of Russian dolls that were a bit of a “thing” at one time? Maybe you were even lucky enough to own one. As a child, there was something about them that really intrigued me. The stylised, capsule-shaped, wooden doll, painted with black hair, a smiley face, and exotic Russian clothing, which opened to reveal an identical, but smaller doll, and then again and again, until finally, you reached the inner doll, perfect and whole, and with a weight to it that made it seem real amidst all the shells which had been removed. If you’re watching on the video, you can see a photo of one, to remind you.

I’m sure that even then, they were mass-produced, but the originals must have been works of great skill; carefully carved and hollowed, lovingly painted and cared over. Hand made. All “the same”, yet each one unique.

I hadn’t given these lovely things a thought for many years, until they cropped up again in the START course. In one of the videos, the presenter, Robin, uses one to speak very personally of himself – and by association, of ourselves – and something of how God sees us, and how we respond to God.

He starts with the outer doll – the one “on show” – and speaks about his “public persona” – confident, jokey, a bit brash.

Then he opens and reveals the next doll inside – how it feels to be him. Unsure, a bit insecure, prone to depression

And then the next doll – all the things in his life which have shaped him, and battered him – the hurts he has experienced, times when he wasn’t loved and cherished, disappointments and pain

And then the next doll – deeper in, smaller still. All the times when he has done the hurting, when he has caused pain to others

And finally the last tiny doll. Solid and weighty. Not hollow, but complete and whole. He describes this as the “real Robin”. The Robin beneath and within all those layers of hurts and insecurities and image. The Robin who only God sees. The “original” Robin, the one who God knows and loves as he looks through all those outer layers. The “original” Robin, who knows and loves God in response.

I was reminded of this picture when I read a reflection on Mary earlier this week.

It has long seemed to me that artists, from Renaissance painters to Victorian hymn writers and beyond, have done Mary, the mother of Jesus, a grave disservice. Between their desire to represent the significance of Mary’s assent to God’s call, and the influence of the social and cultural understanding of womanhood in their times, they have generally reduced her to a bland and pious figure who wouldn’t say boo to the proverbial goose.

The problem is, that I'm not sure how these images reflect the character of Mary as we see her in Scripture.

For a start off, she seems to me to be a pretty robust and savvy young woman. Her response to the arrival of Gabriel and his greeting, isn't to have a fit of the vapours. Unlike her cousin-in-law Zechariah the priest who, earlier in the chapter receives a similar visit, and "is terrified, and fear overwhelms him", Mary doesn't seem to be in the least overawed by an angel popping up in her daily routine - and rather than being afraid, goes straight to wondering what it's all about. And not just wondering, but thinking deeply. Pondering. No "simple young girl" here.

And then Gabriel tells her of God's plan. And here it seems to me that again Mary takes it all in her stride. This is a young woman who knows of God and his purposes, who is familiar with the prophecies of a new king in the line of David; of a new, everlasting, kingdom. She doesn't waste time with the why. Not even with the "why me?" She hears and recognises the call of God in the message of the angel. Here is someone who not only knows *about* God, but who, within the limits of her time, knows God.

So her reply is purely practical. How? How can this be, since I am a virgin? She is not someone "wrapped in cotton wool" - shielded from the realities of life and death, of conception and birth, of the way human bodies work in case she becomes sullied by them. She is down to earth, *of* the earth (as we all are) – used to flesh, and blood, and pain, and mess.

Unlike the depictions of the painters and poets, she is not some impossible icon of motherhood, but someone just like us...

Someone we can identify with, with hopes and dreams and aspirations,
Thinking, practical, real.

I wonder how long the interval was between the angel's words "for nothing will be impossible with God", and Mary's reply?

How long for her to let go of those hopes and dreams and aspirations, those expectations - a quiet life with Joseph, respectability, family, work and play, and the every day ups and downs of provincial life....

How long to embrace the new future of God's call, with its new risks – maybe losing Joseph, forfeiting her reputation, even being cast out of society - a road ahead that takes an abrupt turning, beyond which she can see nothing?

What must that have taken?

And yet, deep within herself, the knowledge that if this is God's way then she will take it, whatever it may bring.

We know something of that future

- The joyful understanding of her role the purposes of God, which breaks forth in the words of the Magnificat which we heard this morning
- The pondering on just who this child to whom she has given birth is, and the nature of his kingship, as he is greeted by shepherds
- Simeon's powerful prophecy that a sword will pierce her soul
- The times of perplexity as he grows and begins his ministry....
- ...and of joy as she sees her faith in him justified as he turns the water of purification into the wine of the new kingdom
- The indescribable torment of watching him die on the cross
- The wildness of the resurrection
- The joyful community of the early church

She knows nothing of this. Just senses God's call on her life....

.... and responds from the core of her being

.... and offers herself to God's new future. "Here am I... let it be with me according to your word."

As the poem we used at the lighting of the Advent candles today, says

"A light for his mother, so brave and so young
Obedient, rebellious, in speech and in song
She welcomed a kingdom far greater than Rome
She offered her body and heart as God's home....."

And it seems to me, that the important thing about "the Virgin Mary", is not so much whether she "had known a man" as the Biblical writers would express it, but that she knew God. That the tiniest, most whole and solid Russian-doll Mary within her, had met with God, and sparked a new life.

The Franciscan theologian and writer, Richard Rohr, puts it like this

"Mary proceeds – as we must do in life – making her commitment without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead. I treasure the story because it forces me to ask: When the mystery of God's love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest truest self" (my smallest Russian-doll), "and say something new, a "yes" that will change me forever."

So what of us. Can we see, in our mind's or spirit's eye, our own innermost "Russian doll", within those layers of mess and of self-protection – the true self who God sees when he looks at us? And can we respond from the inner most core of our being, as Mary did? Without knowing where it will take us, but trusting in God's call on our life?

And so we close, with a final comment from Richard Rohr

“If Jesus is the representative of the total givenness of God to creation, then perhaps Mary is the representative of humanity, showing us how the gift is received. And I believe that is why we love Mary. She’s a stand-in for all of us. When we can say, like her, “Let it be with me according to your word, then we are truly ready for Christmas.”

