**Luke 1: 26 - 38.**

**“Greetings, favoured one! the Lord is with you”**

In the name of The Father, Son and of Holy Spirit, Amen

However often I hear it I always think there is something profoundly moving about God’s visitation into Mary’s life and her call to bear the Christ-child into the world. In verse 28 of our Gospel, the angel Gabriel says to Mary, “Greetings, favoured one! the Lord is with you”

It is beautiful, isn’t it, that Mary should be favoured by God: what a wonderful young woman she must have been to be favoured in such a way by God, what an incredible calling on her life to bear the Saviour of the World, to be chosen for that ministry, to be blessed by God in that way.

And yet, as so often it is with us, so it was with Mary, that her life was full of contrasts, and often a mess.

The angel Gabriel had said, “Greetings, favoured one!”

Perhaps Mary reflected on that encounter when she stood at the foot of the cross and reflected on the pain she felt then, and had at many other times in her life. She might have thought “If I am favoured by God, he has a strange way of showing it”.

Yes, Mary had known moments of deep joy in her life – of course she had - but she had also been taken into moments of deep, deep pain beyond understanding.

Her life, like ours, perhaps particularly over this last year, was a study of contrasts: joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, clarity and confusion. And Mary, like us, had to learn to navigate the waters of life in such a way as to find meaning and purpose as a child of God.

But why do I say Mary’s life was often a mess?

The start of Mary’s marriage was a mess: we all know the story. Mary had become pregnant during the period of betrothal and, under the law of the Torah, she faced divorce at the very least and possibly even being stoned for her perceived behaviour. Mary had become a disgrace to the family and an embarrassment to Joseph, he even considered a quick and quiet annulment of the betrothal. Her marriage was a mess.

Her finances had problems: again, we know the story. In Luke 2, we are told about the census that Caesar Augustus had ordered and how Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to be registered but when they arrived, there was no room for them to stay anywhere.

Well, call me cynical, but I’m pretty sure a room could have been found if they had enough cash to pay for it and a little more besides; I’m sure the palm of an enterprising innkeeper could have been greased with a few extra denarii. But Joseph was a carpenter – not much money in that I suppose, so their financial mess resulted in Mary giving birth in the worst possible conditions, she had to lay her new born baby in the animals’ feeding trough.

Her marriage was a mess. Her finances were a mess.

But also, her community was in a mess. Mary was a good Jewish women, growing up under the tyranny of an oppressive military dictatorship. The Romans were very much in control - but even their own leaders, like King Herod, were tyrants who ruled over society with a rod of iron. Not so many years previously, there had been a civil uprising, a revolt against the Romans violently put down, and even then, in Mary’s day, the world was a dangerous place into which to bring a child.

      I wonder if there are times when you feel a bit like Mary? Perhaps this year has been one of those times. So many people have had their lives disrupted in so many painful ways.

 We look at our lives and for many all we see is chaos and mess:

Covid 19 has disrupted and changed just about everything. Perhaps we have suffered ourselves, or had relatives and friends who have. Perhaps even lost family or friends. Perhaps there is financial stress or the employment or business situation is causing anxiety.

Perhaps we feel trapped and unable to escape from our day-to-day pressures of keeping healthy and trying to feel useful. We are not able to see our families and friends as we would like, there will be at least one empty chair at many Christmas tables this year.

So it seems not unreasonable to look at our lives and all we see is mess.

But, of course, something else was happening in this story about Mary…

Yes, her life was a mess: but there was an emerging miracle in that mess: Every birth is a miracle, but it was Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World who was emerging from her.

I suppose it is likely that Mary could only see the mess, but God was working through all that and providing a miracle.

Although for Mary, the miracle was probably being obscured by the mess - that did not mean that the miracle was any less real…

I wonder if there is a miracle in your mess, in my mess? Maybe it is obscured right now. But if we are able to look at the circumstances of our lives differently, perhaps we may get a glimpse, just a glimpse, of a miracle emerging.

I believe in miracles, though I rarely see, and in fact don’t expect to see instantaneous ones. Instead, I believe that miracles emerge: they don’t come fully-grown – they need to be nurtured and safeguarded in the womb of our being, and possibly for longer than nine months.

Isn’t that what Mary had to do?

For 9 months Mary had to carry that miracle in secret. And even when people saw the signs of the miracle growing within her and heaped scorn and abuse on her and misunderstood the miracle within, she still believed in and loved the miracle and guarded it with all of her own being.

And even after she gave birth to the miracle, she had to care for Him, nurture Him and guard Him; first by carefully wrapping Him and feeding Him, then by escaping with Him to Egypt later returning when it was safe.

I believe in miracles and I believe that there is the possibility of a miracle in every mess. But it needs to be sought out carefully: we need patience to look for it, we need to give it time to emerge - and we need to nurture it and safeguard it and allow it to grow in our lives.

Like Mary, we need to be able to look deeply into our circumstances and trust that God is perhaps growing a miracle around us. We can have faith in God even when we find it hard to have faith in ourselves or the world around us.

If we can do that, we will, just perhaps, be able to make some sense of the mess and learn to see it for what it can be; the birthplace of a miracle.

And then our faith and trust in God will increase and we will be able to join with Mary and say:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”