

If we were to take the Bible at face value- which we rarely should- but if just for the sake of me having something to say to fill the next ten minutes (because the silence would be awkward if I just stopped). If we were to take the Bible at face value, then we would have to say that Mary was a woman of very few words. Taciturn would be way too far over the side of talkative. Tight lipped would be putting it mildly. Never known to blab, unlikely to spill the beans, Mary's cat always tightly buttoned in her bag: any of the preceding would be a most reasonable appraisal of this very building's patron saint. I know you try to make up her chinwagging deficit every Sunday in the five minutes before the eucharist starts. Still, if we use the Bible as our guide, the Mother of Jesus is, notable for, well keeping mum. With so little to go on 'what Mary said' makes an excellent subject for a sermon: not much to say and soon done. That is what you want isn't it?

Let's see how it pans out.

Here then in the debut pulpit production of the Reduced Bible Study Company are the Complete words of Mary as regaled in the Scriptures:

Before Jesus is born, nay before he is conceived, at the sudden appearance of a heavenly messenger Our Lady says:

*"How can this be, for I am a virgin?"*

When Gabriel has angelsplained the deal to her:

*"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

When Jesus is just about to enter his teenage years we get:

*"Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."*

And when he's fully grown:

*"They have no wine.*

and

*"Do whatever he tells you."*

And, er. That's all folks. The collected sayings of Mary. That's it, apart from the one time, just the once, when she bursts into song. The song she sings has more words than all the rest of her speeches put together. And what a song it is. Not a nursery rhyme to lull the baby Jesus off to sleep- after all no need, as no crying he makes. Not a lullaby for a somnolent Son of God, instead the Magnificat. It's the song that lays to rest forever the 'politics and religion don't mix' fallacy. Just imagine all those Anglican choral evensongs over 5 centuries, and all with some radical socialism at the centre.

*He hath cast down the mighty from their seat; He hath exalted the humble and meek.*

Irony doesn't get much more delicious.

But we hear the Magnificat a lot, at least once a week or once a day for some of us, so we'll be leaving it waiting the glorious day of revolution and move on to Mary's other words in our search for the ideal homiletic subject.

'Let it be with me according to your word' certainly gets the lion's share of the attention when Christians stop to think about what Mary said. It's her one-liner greatest hit. So we won't be going there today either, after all, in this pulpit we pride ourselves on our tendency to periodically go way off-piste. Nor will we be spending time with 'Child why have you treated us like this' because it's a variant of that timeless refrain 'What time do you call this?' that all parents of adolescents everywhere in all times know by heart and you don't come to church to stay at home. 'We've run out of booze' is a bit more promising, but we demonstrated the way round that last Harvest Festival with a lot of prayer and a splash of food colouring. And no Christian should need to be told twice 'Do whatever he tells you'.

Which leaves us with the very first words Mary is reported as having spoken. These are words that Christians have always tended to skate over quickly, partly because- as they allude to reproduction- they're a tiny bit embarrassing, but mostly because we're eager to hear what comes next, the Queen of Heaven's greatest hit, the bit that concentrates on how obedient Mary was. But maybe we shouldn't. There's no hurry here. Let's linger a while. Yep, 'Let it be with me according to your word' is a major message about following God's will and a lesson we are all called to take to heart. We do well to pay heed.

But that's not how the conversation starts.

When the angel first appears and tells Mary it's time to think about knitting some baby boots, her response is: "How can this be, for I am a virgin?" What she expresses is a mix of frank incredulity and doubting scepticism. In the Northern dialect gospel that line is probably rendered something like "Don't be daft lad. And what's with the white dress and wings then?"

Confronted with a personal message direct from God, hot off the altar and hand delivered by one of only seven archangels no less, Mary's response is to question.

"Greetings Mortal! Here's what God says..."

"Er, but what about...?"

It's clearly something in the water round those parts, prying open the jaws of the gift-horse a cultural norm, as something similar was what Mary's ageing cousin-in-law Zechariah said when an angel came to tell him he was about to hear the pitter patter of tiny feet. But I digress. We're not doing John the Baptist today. So back to Mary.

Since ancient times, ever since Christians have started trying seriously to do the theology stuff Mary has been considered to be an archetype of all Christian believers, the mother of the church and an exemplar of the faithful; her assumption into heaven at her death a promise of the future glory for all who follow her son. Where she points, we look; where she has gone, we too will go. Everything she has said and done has been imbued with the weightiest of meaning and the most solemn significance. Truly Our Lady is the Queen of the Saints.

Her journey starts with doubt and scepticism. Yes, if we follow the story through we last see Mary at Pentecost, and her response is very different. Now she is a firm believer, waiting, praying, worshipping alongside the apostles. That transformation was neither easy nor instant. In the stories of Jesus infancy Mary is a reticent figure, watching, listening, storing in her heart. When Jesus' public ministry takes off, in some of the Gospels at least, at first she thinks her son has gone mad, completely lost the plot. By the time the wedding comes to Cana she seems to have realised the truth of what is going on, and so we meet her standing with the disciple Jesus loved at the foot of the cross. Finally she witnesses the joys of the resurrection and at Pentecost,

she sees that same Holy Spirit which came upon her when the angel spoke those many years ago, now descending upon all Jesus' followers.

And right back at the beginning, it starts with questioning, scepticism and doubt. '*How can this be?*'

Now we might read Annunciation to Pentecost as a tale of doubts dispelled of certainty replacing scepticism, those first questions left behind as Mary proceeds on her journey of faith, spiritual milk no longer drunk once she has been weaned onto solid faith. But if that was so, then Mary would not be a terribly good example for Christ's pilgrim people after all, her journey of faith less a map for us to follow than an impossible ideal dangled before us forever beyond our reach.

Certainty will indeed come as we grow in faith, but it does not sweep away our initial doubt. Certainty does not replace questioning as a part of faith, it is an addition to it. Believing in Jesus, being a Christian, is to grow ever more faithful at the same time as growing ever more doubtful. Our doubts *should* increase when we begin to have more glimpses of what God might be. The eternal mystery, the transcendent majesty should make clear to us our utter inability to even begin to comprehend the Holy. The more we look, the less we know; the further we penetrate the fiery pillar, the more clouded our vision becomes.

Many religious people will promise you absolute certainty in faith. It's all here in this. All you have to do is this. And boy is that an attractive thing they are offering. There are always crowds round those campfires. But really what's on offer there is a child's toy: all bright primary colours, smooth corners and simple shapes. Which is great for a child, but as the infant grows, increasingly unsatisfactory. And if that child never asks questions, never probes, investigates, experiments, argues: it will never increase what it knows. If you've stopped questioning, you've stopped trying, you might even say you've lost your faith.

Pentecost may not be the final appearance of Mary in the Bible: for many that comes in fact in the [passage we have just heard from the] book of Revelation, {with} St John's vision of the woman crowned with the stars. Mary in heaven, the final destination in her journey of faith. There she no longer needs to ask the question she has been asking all of her life: How can this be? Now she knows. Now she sees face to face.

We're not there yet. A central part of getting there for all of us, is asking that same question again and again, How can this be? Each time we ask we will be moving that little bit closer to the answer.