

Christmas I or the Holy Name of Jesus

Bristol Cathedral Sunday 27 December 2020

I heard for the first time this year, the song,
Mary did you know?
It was sung with absolute sweetness and purity
by one of the young finalists
in the BBC Chorister of the Year programme.

The song was written over ten years ago,
so I'm not sure quite how it has passed me by,
and at first hearing the lyrics are rather touching.
The first verse asks,

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new?ⁱ

But on reflection,
I've come to think that this song
paints a rather saccharine image
of the young woman who said "Yes" to God.

It implies that she had no imagination,
that she didn't know her scripture
and that she wasn't really paying attention to the
angels – which I find rather unlikely.

The very name that she was commanded
to call her son is a clue
to the vocation God has planned for him
and the life that Mary will have to witness
as his mother.

Today our readings are those used in the church to
celebrate the feast of The Holy Name of Jesus.

The conjunction of Sundays and the lectionary
means that our readings are slightly less familiar than
some others we hear at this time of year,
and in particular I want to focus on two phrases.

The first is Mary's response
to hearing the excited words of the shepherds,
repeating the message of the angels
who told them that this child was
the Saviour, Christ the Lord.

Luke tells us that Mary treasured these words
and pondered them in her heart.

If those words seem familiar, they are almost identical to the ones Luke uses after Mary has encountered Nicodemus in the temple, when he prophesies the fall of Israel and her own suffering also.

The second phrase is that simple one that tells us that the child was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luke wants us to be clear that Mary has some sense of the huge responsibility that God has given her, that she knows that she has been caught up in something absolutely awesome, and that it will demand more of her than she can ever imagine.

You see, unless the Angel Gabriel spoke in Latin to this young Hebrew woman, he told her to name her son “Yeshua,” or “Joshua.”

And if we think about the Hebrew antecedents to this name, we can glimpse something of its power. Because “Joshua” is both a harkening back, and a glance forwards. “Joshua” recalls the great patriarch, the father of the nation, who picked up Moses’ mantle.

It was Joshua who finished Moses’ job.
It was Joshua who finished the journey of the Exodus.
It was Joshua who brought the Children of Israel into the Promised Land.

And the word itself, “Joshua,” or “Yeshua,” has meaning too.
It means “God saves.”

So it points forward to the saving acts which will in years to come occur on a cross on a lonely hill and in an empty tomb.

So let’s use today not only to reflect on the saving name of Jesus, but on the part that Mary played in God’s saving work and how she has inspired others to share in it, with a full sense of the costliness of that work.

Mary’s own name is sometimes associated, like her ancestor Miriam’s, with the bitterness of suffering. She came from a people who had been long suffering and were once again under the yoke of oppression.

Yet, Luke puts into her mouth
a great song of rebellion and yearning for justice,
when she shares the news of her pregnancy with
her cousin Elizabeth.
She prophesies that her son
will cast down the mighty from their thrones
and will lift up the lowly.
Surely, no-one can expect such an upheaval to
occur without pain,
and you might guess that the poorest will suffer
first.

That song, the one we know as the Magnificat, is
one of the reasons that Mary is so beloved in places
of poverty, indeed one of my favourite images of
Mary is as the Mother of the Poor, sheltering people
under the spread of her cloak.

Mary cannot have known what her vocation would
cost her,
but she had a good sense that God's plan would
create upheaval and suffering,
before her final hopes might be realised.

We have discovered this year,
perhaps, that there are challenges to what we are
willing to endure for the benefit of others.

We have also seen how the poor have suffered
disproportionately for the protection of the whole
community.

Perhaps in the year ahead we can share in Mary's
prophetic vocation,
pointing to the need to heal the divisions in our city
and nation,
naming oppression and exclusion wherever we see
them, and sharing in casting them down.

I discovered that there is a second set of lyrics
written by Canadian theologian Jenifer Henry in
response to the carol... it begins

Mary did you know,
that your ancient words
would still leap off our pages?
Mary did you know,
that your spirit song
would echo through the ages?

And ends...

Mary did you know,
that we hear your voice
for the healing of the nations?
Mary did you know,
your unsettling cry
can help renew creation?
Do you know,
that we need your faith,
the confidence of you,
May the God that you believe in,
be so true.ⁱⁱ

When Mary named her child, as the Angels had
instructed, she named him Jesus, God Saves.
She knew that his saving work would involve
suffering both for her son and for herself.

Yet she courageously accepted the call,
and full of hope she shared her song,
calling us to share with her
in the saving work of God,
who casts down the mighty
and lifts up the lowly.
Who feeds the hungry with good things.

May it be so,
Amen

ⁱ lyrics by Mark Lowry 1984, music by Buddy Greene 1991.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIOnzeIN3XQ>