

Sermon series on 'Women in the Bible'

Week 1: Mary, the Blessed mother.

(Luke 1:26-28)

What's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to you?

What's the worst thing anyone has ever said to you?

Words have power. They can build us up; or they can tear us down. I still remember a comment my English teacher once made about me that I found crushing and affected me for years later. Similarly, I also remember words of affirmation that were said to me at particular times, that brought hope, comfort and encouragement when I needed it.

It's good to speak words of encouragement to each other, to build each other up. But all too often, we only ever hear the negative things said about us, and we allow those words to define us. Not so with Mary, the mother of Jesus. She is living for an audience of one, and allows what God says of her to define who she is. How so? Read on.

Some years back, I came across a reflection on the annunciation to Mary, from Luke's gospel, by an American Lutheran minister called Nadia Bolz-Weber. I have been re-visiting some of her writings recently and was reminded of her reflection on this encounter between Mary and the angel. Much of what is written here is based upon her reflection, not least because it's important to have a female perspective when it comes to a sermon series on 'Women in the Bible.' She is perhaps more qualified to speak about Mary's experience than I am.

Nadia recalls how, as a teenage Christian, she never liked those sermons where all the preacher did was tell us that we all needed to pull our socks up and be better people.

Hand on heart, I've preached sermons like it! Sometimes they are necessary because they point out blind spots in our attitudes and behaviours that we need to become aware of in order to address. But I think Nadia was referring to those sermons where the preacher's main point was effectively 'How are you going to get God to love you?' As if God is like some heavenly schoolmaster or policeman, waiting to see if we are 'following the rules', doing the right things, being grateful enough about Jesus' crucifixion that we would start living in a very particular way. That is to say, waiting to see if we didn't swear, or tell lies, or listen to rock music, or have any kind of sexual thought before we were married – if we were always cheerful, and never drank alcohol or were never irritable or rude. Because then we would become worthy of God's favour. Then, we would be living in a way that

would persuade a reluctant God that we were worthy enough to be loved.

Like Nadia, had I been in a position to hear sermons like that as a teenager, I'm not sure I would have liked them. I base that on the fact that I don't like them now either! Why, because I am incapable of being able to make myself into something worthy of God's favour. I notice in myself a desire and a tendency to keep trying. I find myself wishing sometimes that I was like so and so, who seems to have more self-discipline and will- power than I do, who seems more naturally predisposed toward clean living and clean speaking and clean thinking and able to pull off this worthiness thing much better than me. But even after the several thousand guilt trips my heart has made over the years, I just don't seem to be able to pull it off. And I remain frequently plagued by thoughts about my own lack of goodness and sense of unworthiness.

Those sermons make it sound like God is saying a 'conditional' "Maybe" towards me – like I need to clean my life up before God can do anything with me. Those sermons make God sound like my English teacher!

In the reading for today, the angel comes to Mary with the words, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured." It's an interesting greeting. Luke suggests that Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. What had did this young peasant girl done to earn God's favour?

It's true that we have no idea what young Mary was like before this night the angel visited her. But maybe she was worthy, maybe she was highly favoured, because she dared to trust that God, through his angel, said she was. Did Mary make herself into a girl who God could favour because she took the advice of her youth rabbi at the synagogue and lived the way she should? Or, instead, maybe God looked upon her with favour because it is God's nature to look upon young peasant girls and prostitutes and tax collectors and adulterous kings and prisoners and alcoholics and princes and fishermen with favour. Because God is just like that.

If an angel turned up at your house or mine tonight and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured' I wonder whether we would believe the angel's word? I'd be saying, you've got the wrong person. There's no way I would trust that the angel meant me.

But Mary did. She trusted this word from the angel. And maybe *that* is what made her favoured. We may feel more comfortable with the idea that we can live a life that can make us worthy of God's favour, but what if, like Mary, we just trusted that we are already highly

favoured, already fully loved and accepted and useful for God just as we are, not because of who we are, but because of who God is?

An angel came from God to this ordinary little town called Nazareth to an ordinary young peasant girl, whose name was Mary. The angel said to her, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' And her soul felt its worth as she simply trusted God's word to her.

Her response to the angel was not 'I will do everything in my power to be who God wants me to be'. Neither did she say, 'I don't think you can mean me because I am not worthy.' Humility isn't disagreeing with God. No, in Mary's humility, her response was 'May it be me as you have said, according to your word. I trust that I am who God says that I am.'

Given the predicament God's calling put Mary in—an un married mother-to-be, I imagine Mary had other words spoken to her by others over the coming months—less flattering words; insulting words, words designed to bring her down and not build her up. But Mary's trust is in what God says about her, not what others say about her.

Only God knows us inside out and so only God gets to tell us who we are. And he tells us, like he told Mary, that we are highly favoured. It's not what others say about us that defines us; it's not our parents or our bank managers or our bosses or our vicars, or our English teachers who get to tell us who we are. Not even you get to tell yourself who you are. It's only God, and to God we are highly favoured, worthy enough to be, like Mary, the carriers of God's life and heartbeat within us.

We don't live to earn God's favour. We live in response to the favour he has already bestowed upon us. So, like Mary, may it be for us as God has said.

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June 2018*