

Sermon for BCP 08.30, Christmas Eve 2023

Faith is a risk worth taking

The Gospel reading today is a story about Mary hearing the biggest announcement of her life, that she will be the mother of Christ whom everyone has been waiting for. She listens, thinks, then accepts the biggest risk of her life.

What does the word 'risk' mean to you? Maybe for you or people you know, 'risk' means something personal. Some people relish the risk of making investments, not knowing what the outcome will be but hoping to build their savings or their income. Or maybe you're like my 30-something niece who's just come back from climbing Everest. Her parents worried a lot about the risk she was facing and it's certainly a risk I plan never, ever, to face! Or maybe you've taken a risk moving home across the country or across continents for work or family reasons. Maybe you've had to take a risky decision about medical treatment, for yourself or for a loved one. You've had to trust the medics to do their best, following their own professional Risk Assessment. In all those examples people had to have faith that the outcomes will be positive.

So what are the 'risks' of faith revealed in our readings this morning? Like his other letters, Paul's letter to the Romans is full of encouragement and realism, recognising the challenges of new Christian communities around the Mediterranean. He knows the risks some of them are taking in coming out as Christians in sometimes hostile societies. He himself has been attacked in some cities, beaten up, imprisoned and deported, all because of his preaching about the risen Christ and because he was supporting new Christians.

His main message in our reading today is, *"Go on, you know the risks but say 'Yes' to God. Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, long predicted, long hoped for, has finally arrived among us. Have faith in the eternal God"*.

And then there's Mary.

Over the centuries the story of Mary and the Angel Gabriel has inspired painters and sculptors, film makers, writers and animators. The Renaissance painter Fra Angelico painted the scene many times over in his lifetime. He kept adding something different as he developed his way of explaining the story. We can see one of his famous Annunciation paintings in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Every time an artist has tackled this subject, right up to the present day, there's a different perspective, both in style and meaning. Mary usually wears blue, her traditional colour, but her character may vary considerably. You may think of her in paintings, statues, prayers, stained glass windows and Christmas carols, as a quiet, submissive

teenager, serenely accepting God's purpose for her. At times there's been a focus on her vulnerability in society and that resonates with many people too. Then in the year 2000 a new statue of Mary was installed in the Lady Chapel in Ely Cathedral. Personally I prefer that image of Mary and I'm so glad she is not in a size 8 blue dress! She is an adult, she is strong, larger than life, inviting us to share in an amazing message of faith.

That faith takes courage. The story in Luke's Gospel tells us that Mary goes from uncertainty, to questioning, to resolve. Mary is extremely surprised to hear what the Angel Gabriel is announcing to her. She is puzzled at first, then she questions God's message saying "*How can this be?*" in verse 34, then finally in verse 38 she says, "*Let it be with me according to your word*". She accepts an enormous risk. She says, in effect, "Yes, I'll do it".

During the church year we will hear more stories in the New Testament about Mary. Jesus gave her good cause to be worried about him during his lifetime. Immediately after Christmas Day we will hear about Mary, Joseph and the toddler Jesus escaping as refugees to the South. For me, and possibly for you too, that reminds me of young parents in Gaza today, fleeing bombs and famine. The Gospel writers also tell us that Jesus was not always an easy person to live with. He was outstanding in his own faith, as a teenager and in his ministry of healing and preaching, and would not be held back. But Mary kept faith in him, right to the end, finally seeing him crucified. Mary as the mother of Jesus certainly faced a series of risks along the way.

So what about our personal risks in a life of faith? The story of the Annunciation to Mary reminds us of the surprising presence of God. The story tells us that we cannot anticipate how and when God will break into our lives. Even the most famous and holy people in history say that they are regularly surprised by God, constantly learning more. Some people are shocked into belief when they make a choice between faith and despair. Some of us have a longer, less dramatic, journey into faith. Even the people in church who seem to have it all sorted, know that from time to time there are risks. In the Christian life we accept that we have to keep learning, keep questioning, keep resolving to follow Jesus with the help of God's creative power, the Holy Spirit.

It has been said that at Christmas the baby Jesus was the unprecedented entry of God into humanity. That's actually quite high theology but at the same time a very simple message. God came to live at risk as one of us and the story of Jesus shows us that, as the Gospel reading tells us in verse 37, '*nothing will be impossible with God*'. So like Mary, let us say, today and every day, "Yes, I'll do it" knowing that it is a risk worth taking.

Amen.