

Sermon Notes from 10 am service 20 November 2009

Micah 5 v 2-5a

Luke 1 v 46-55

Mary as a woman of rural Galilee would have lived in a small family house of stone and mud-brick. Presuming she worked like any young girl, grinding wheat and barley into flour, preparing dishes of beans, vegetables, eggs, fruits, nuts, and occasional chunks of mutton. Wool had to be made into clothing. Bread had to be baked. A few chickens and a donkey had to be fed. And alongside that there were always little children to care for.

Almost daily she could have carried a large jar of water from the town well for washing and cooking. The Jews had learned that cleanliness prevented disease, so frequent washing -- an important chore of women -- became part of their religious practice.

Just as for the other women of Nazareth, the seasons and times of harvest determined what Mary had to do. With the first downpour of rain in October, the vital wheat crop was sown on the mountain fields, to be gathered -- if all went well -- in May. Small dark olives, knocked from dull green trees in September, had to be pressed into oil for lamps and food. In May or June, early figs were picked; in July, the softer juicy fruit. Grapes and pomegranates ripened in September and October. Yes there were crops but they had to be worked for. It is a tough climate and dry land.

From the people of Nazareth Mary would have learned about life. Few strangers visited the town. It had little wealth, culture or learning. Her name was Mary, a form of the name Miriam, the famous sister of Moses. The name was common among Jewish women in those days. Wherever she was born, Mary's life most likely unfolded in the staunch Jewish settlement of Nazareth in the hills of Galilee, not far from the important caravan routes linking Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The hill climate was dry and healthy. And though the land often lacked water and no one knew from one year to the next if enough rain would

fall or if invading locusts or field mice would spoil the crops -- still, facing uncertainty only made the people of Galilee more hard-working and close-knit.

Mary rural small life. Lost in the crowd. The word used about her for lowly can also be translated depression or humiliation.

Little is also the word used for the town at the centre of the story. Bethlehem the little town that is not the centre of other things. More Berrylands than London. Not the place where wise people would head if they were looking for a king. It is out of you.

So I started work on this sermon and then broke off to go to take someone communion and as I was walking back I realised that the message of the season is completely in that experience. We had our bread and wine with me putting the bread into her mouth and me holding a tissue under her chin as we shared wine. We had to press the bell because she kept slipping in her wheel chair and needed to be pulled back up. Yet the frailty to the whole thing is what makes it real. If someone had taken their hand and held it over the mouth and nose of the baby Jesus asleep on the hay it would have been all over. Over . All the good that has happened to our world through our faith. (Yes I know people are always talking about the wars that are caused by religion but there are schools and hospitals there are people who are fed and injustice that is overturned. That is before you start to think about all the local stuff of people who do their paid employment with integrity driven by their faith, or those who do voluntary work, or street pastors or coffee service, or night shelter)

Anyway to get back- all that good that could have been snuffed out by the death of the baby. Tiny. Dependent. Needing milk and clean linen.

Tiny dependent a bit like us really. A bit like the church needs to be. Leaning on God not it's own strength. Can we do it- no not unless God helps us. Then we step up and we go. Can we do it? Yes we can do amazing things but not because we are strong but because we are weak. We are leaning on God. If we are ploughing on with our own abilities it is going to go horribly wrong. If we are leaning into God then we can turn the world upside down and be a part of something amazing.

So you Bethlehem small town that is surrounded by a wall. A place where security means your people can not move freely. Out of even you has come the one who will set people free.

So you Joseph the skilled craftsman treated like dirt, you a man forced by the occupying army to move with your pregnant wife out of you will come one who will restore the dignity of oppressed people everywhere.

So you Mary the young girl frightened for her life, the child about to give birth, you whose life plans and dreams are in tatters and whose reputation is shredded on the floor out of you will come one who will give the lives of all children born in poverty value and

Is it possible that your times of weakness are your best times? That the times when you think you are strong you are forging in the wrong direction. That what is required is that you lean on God and then do what is needed. It is not that you sit still moaning and whining about how tough life is but that you are motivated not by your own strength but the power and strength of God and then get on and live it, do it.

From the moment of his birth people have been trying to snuff him out. They have not succeeded. The light shines and the darkness has never overcome it. Not even on a cross. Even there the place of ultimate vulnerability we who know how the story ends know there is life-light in that dark place. That is the good news of this season.

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