



# FAITH praying and believing ON THE EARTH

## ***THE LORD BE WITH YOU***

**T**he Virgin Mary, the most holy, pure, spotless and ever-virgin Mother of God, is the believer par excellence, held out to us as a model of silence, humility and submission. Christians throughout the ages have asked her for her prayers and have tried to follow her in her following of her Son, Jesus Christ Our Lord. But sometimes the very sublimeness of her vocation can cause us to put her on a pedestal; we venerate her but she seems to be slightly superhuman, not subject to the emotions and feelings of the rest of us.

If we examine the biblical narratives about Mary though, her total humanity shines through. She was a woman subject to all the joys and sorrows of a woman's existence and as such she is, after Our Lord, the best guide to life, of what it is to live a truly God-given life.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" (*Lk.1:28*) "And Mary was greatly troubled at this saying of the angel". Why? Why was she so troubled? Was it not every pious Jewish woman's dearest desire to give birth to the Messiah? Should she not have been filled with awe, joy and wonder? But she was greatly troubled. If you look back through the Old Testament to the occasions where it is said "The Lord was with him", or "The Lord will be with you", or "Do not be afraid for I am with you, says the Lord", you will see that they are nearly all occasions where the Lord is asking something that will be extremely testing: Joseph sold as a slave in Egypt, cast into prison for an offence he did not commit - but the Lord was with him (*Gen 39:21*); Gideon was visited by an angel who said "The Lord is with you" (*Judges 6:12*) before giving him the task of defeating the Midianites; Isaiah in a Suffering Servant Song says "Fear not for I am with you . . . when you pass through deep waters I am with you" (*Is.43:2*); In Jeremiah, "They will attack you, but they will not prevail, for I am with you to deliver you and save you says the Lord" (*Jer. 1:19*).

So Mary had good reason to be greatly troubled at the angel's greeting, and even more so when she heard what he was announcing. "You will conceive and bear a son". But it was not an ordinary birth that he was announcing. What he was saying was "You will become pregnant and give birth to the Messiah in

trust in God. Very human in her reactions, she was so open to God that he was able to work through her in an unprecedented way. She was so perfectly attuned to the will of God that everything she did showed forth Christ spiritually. All this sprang from her life of prayer. Over the years she deepened her relationship with God which became habitual, an ever-flowing well of grace. Often she did not understand what was happening but she firmly believed that all things work together for good for those who love Christ. (*Rom. 8:28*)

Our lives, like Mary's, are made up of small, seemingly insignificant things, but these are the ore from which we can extract pure gold if we do everything for the glory of God. We have been given the Holy Spirit and we are to conceive, give birth to and show forth Christ spiritually even as Mary did physically. Our lives will not be without suffering, there will be much that we do not understand, but like her we need to be able to say "Yes" to God in everything that happens, even when it appears to be most destructive. Everything *does* work for good for those who love Christ, but it is not easy to let that belief affect all our doings. Without prayer and worship we will never deepen our relationship with God who alone infuses grace into us through the action of the Holy Spirit which conforms us more and more to Christ. It all requires discipline and hard work. In Mary we see how an ordinary life can be transformed by grace, but this does not involve a lessening of her humanity. On the contrary it is the subjection of her whole life: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual; to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that brings all these into a right relationship.

We in our turn need not be afraid of our feelings and emotions. What is needed is to bring them under subjection to the Holy Spirit so that they can be directed in good and positive ways. Each time we hear the words "The Lord be with you" we are reminded that God asks of each of us something that will be extremely testing. Each time we have to say *our* "Let it be to me as you have said", confident that the Lord who asks us is to be trusted to give us the grace to do what he asks, (*1 Thess. 5:24*) and that we can be the mother, sister, brother of Our Lord.

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circumstances fraught with danger and difficulty. You will be misunderstood and will have to trust God completely, because the child to be born will have no human father”: “The Holy Spirit will overshadow you”.

Mary, then betrothed to Joseph, was told that she was going to conceive outside marriage; that is, to others she would appear to have committed adultery and the penalty for that was to be stoned to death. No wonder Mary was afraid. Her heart was so clear though - one could almost say that she had the mind of Christ even before her son was conceived - that her trust in God was total. “Let it be as you have said”. She did not know what was involved but said “yes” unconditionally.

Then of course she had to tell Joseph. How sad and disappointed he must have been. He obviously thought first of all that his betrothed had been unfaithful to him, but he was a righteous man and could not bring himself to exact the penalty for adultery so he was minded to put her away quietly. Afterwards he became convinced that the child to be born was no ordinary child but from God and he should marry Mary and be a father to the child. We can imagine Mary’s relief (*Matt. 1:18-25*).

Was it Joseph’s suggestion that Mary should go and visit her cousin Elizabeth? It would get her away from all the tattling tongues in Nazareth, and if it were true that Elizabeth, though barren was also expecting a child, that would be further proof that all was of God. It is sometimes suggested that Mary went to Elizabeth in order to bring her comfort, but surely *she* must have been comforted when she heard her cousin’s acknowledgement of her divine motherhood. It must have been a tremendous consolation to be affirmed by another woman who had known the touch of God in her own life and could recognise it in another. So Mary poured forth her deep thanksgiving in the Magnificat. (*Lk. 1:39-56*).

The months passed. Mary knew the prophecies that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem - but she was in Nazareth. Then came the call for Joseph to be enrolled in the census and so once more the way was opened up for a prophecy to be fulfilled - but at a cost. A long journey on foot while heavily pregnant, no room at the inn, just shelter in a cave. The Christmas story is well-known and loved but the sentimental trappings obscure the reality. Once again the visits from the shepherds and the Magi were counterbalanced by the extreme danger the family found themselves to be in. It was not long before Simeon’s prophecy that a sword should pierce Mary’s heart came true (*Lk. 2:35*) Joseph was warned in a dream to flee the country but Mary had to live with the knowledge that the birth of her son caused the death of many other mothers’ sons who were killed by Herod (*Matt. 2:16*).

After Herod’s death the family returned to Nazareth and the boy Jesus grew up unobtrusively. When he was twelve however the family went up to Jerusalem for the Passover and when they returned Jesus was missing. Through the media we are well aware of the anguish of parents whose child is missing. Mary’s reaction when she and Joseph find Jesus was that of any parent: a mixture of relief and scolding. “Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety”. Jesus’ answer pulled them up short “Did you not realise that anything I do is my Father’s business?” This was not the first intimation that her son was no ordinary boy but it must nevertheless have caused Mary to ponder everything deeply in her heart. (*Lk. 2:41-51*).

There were other occasions where Jesus appears to have rebuked his Mother. At the wedding in Cana he said “Woman, what has that to do with me? My time has not yet come”. But Mary was right. She could sense with her motherly intuition that his time *had* come, and it needed her recognition of it for him to embark on the manifestation of himself to the world. Quietly she told the servants “Do whatever he tells you”, pointing away from herself to her son. What appeared to be rebuffs from Jesus were actually ways of drawing more out of her, leading her to a deeper understanding of his mission. (*Jn. 2:1-11*)

When Mary and other members of the family were worried that Jesus was being so besieged by the crowd that he could not even have a meal they came to take charge of him. Jesus’ reply when given the message that his mother, brothers and sisters were asking for him appeared to be another rebuff. “Who are my mother and my brothers?” It appeared to be a repudiation of the natural ties of kinship, but once again Jesus was using the occasion to teach two deep truths: that anyone who did the will of God was tied by bonds of kinship to Jesus, was his brother and sister and mother; and Mary by being pre-eminently the one who did the will of God was his mother twice over. (*Mk. 3: 20-21, 31-35*)

The final picture we have of Mary in the Gospels is of her standing at the foot of the cross. She said nothing, she was just there with her son in his dying agony. Those who have had to watch someone they love in great pain, being unable to alleviate the suffering by one jot, will understand something of her pain. She did not run away from it but stayed there, giving the only support she could, her presence and her prayers. (*Jn. 19: 25-27*)

From this brief look at the gospel passages about Mary we can see that she was a fully human being subject to the same feelings, emotions, fears, hopes, joys and griefs as the rest of us, but through it all shines her courage and total