

St George's Sermon Series: Remembering Women

Luke 1:39 – 56 (Mary's Song), John 19:25-30 (Mary at the Cross), Acts 1:12-14 (Mary Praying with the Disciples)

MARY THE MOTHER OF JESUS - EXPECTATIONS

By Christine Palmer (6/7 November, 2005)

It is a real privilege to be here today and to be asked to speak. When Matt first asked me to speak I must confess to being a little terrified but when he told me the topic I felt very drawn to taking up the challenge. When he asked me to choose a woman that I related to from the Bible I found that I was a bit stumped. As I began to think about it I kept coming back to Mary. The longer I looked at her story the more I felt that I could relate to various aspects of her life and I hope that you too will find some relevancy to your life today.

I can't profess to having great scholarly knowledge of Mary and I can't say that I relate to being the Messiah's mother, although my children are lovely they are certainly not perfect, what I can relate to and I feel you too may relate to is that of having expectations and having those expectations turn out very differently to what you expect.

Most of us know the Christmas story and Mary is very much a part of that story. Today I want to begin with this part of the story and then take you beyond it. In the passage in Luke we look on as Mary is visiting her relative Elizabeth. Mary is full of joy and expectation, she is carrying the Messiah. Elizabeth too recognises that Mary is to give birth to the Messiah. Mary is so excited she can't contain it. She has to sing about it. Sometimes we fail to understand just what the Messiah meant to the Jews. He was the long awaited saviour and every young Jewish girl dreamt of being able to birth the Messiah.

Listen to her song;

“My soul magnifies the Lord.....” (Luke 1:46-55)

Mary's song gives away all her expectations of what this child is to bring.

Tom Wright, a New Testament Scholar says

“Mary and Elizabeth shared a dream. It was the ancient dream of Israel: the dream that one day the prophets had said would come true. One day Israel's God would do what he had said to Israel's earliest ancestors: all nations would be blessed through Abraham's family. But for that to happen, the powers that kept the world in slavery had to be toppled. Nobody would normally thank God for blessing if they were poor, hungry, enslaved and miserable. God would have to win a victory over the bullies, the power-brokers, the forces of evil which people like Mary and Elisabeth knew all too well, living as they did in the dark days of Herod the Great, whose casual brutality was backed up with the threat of Rome. Mary and Elisabeth, like so many Jews of their time, searched the scriptures, soaked

themselves in the psalms and prophetic writings which spoke of mercy, hope, fulfilment, reversal, revolution, victory over evil, and of God coming to rescue at last.”¹

That is one big list of expectations, her child, her son would finally bring an end to the threat of Rome and Israel would be restored to its rightful place.

We all know the story of Jesus birth, we know that shepherds came to see and worship him and we know that in his infancy wise men also came to see this new little king that had been born. We also know that his birth was considered a threat by Herod and that Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt to keep Jesus safe. All this must have helped to encourage Mary that she had indeed birthed the Messiah.

As Jesus grew older Mary must have been anxious to see Jesus fulfil his role of the Messiah. Like all of the Jews she too waited for an end to the rule of Rome and for the freedom of her people. It would also mean that the rumours that surrounded his conception would be put to rest and people would believe her claim that Jesus was the Messiah, people would finally know the truth.

But as we see the life of Jesus unfold we see that it doesn't quite go as Mary expects. For example; When Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah in his home town of Nazareth, he finishes reading and informs those in the synagogue that this scripture has been fulfilled implying that he is the Messiah. Mary must have been terribly proud and excited, feeling that his time had finally come. Instead the crowd in the synagogue are enraged and turn on Jesus; they are ready to kill him.

Another time Mary and Jesus brothers are looking for Jesus and he is busy teaching. It is so crowded and Mary and the brothers can't get through the crowd so they send a message to Jesus telling him that they are there. Jesus reply was not what they were expecting, instead he answers "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then looks at the crowd and says "Here are my mothers and my brothers! Who ever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Perhaps Mary felt insulted, uncared for, embarrassed by Jesus reply.

(Jesus statement was not really meant to exclude Mary and his brothers but rather was meant to be an inclusive statement of everyone).

Throughout Jesus ministry there is speculation, could this be the long awaited Messiah. There are moments when everyone is amazed by what he can do, heal the sick, raise people from the dead. There are times of confusion as people hear his teachings and parables and do not understand, and there are also the times when Jesus upsets the Jewish leaders with his words and actions.

This must have been a very difficult time for Mary, everyone was talking about her son, it must have been a very confusing time as well as painful as I am sure people shared their thoughts with Mary. I can't help but think that Mary must have questioned God as to what was going on, she must have questioned her own faith? Particularly in the last few days of Jesus life when one day the crowds were shouting out Hosanna and claiming him the Messiah and the next the crowds were shouting out for him to be crucified.

¹ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, (London, 2001, SPCK) p. 15

In John 19:25-30 we read of Mary at the cross. There must have been a very different range of emotions going on in Mary in this passage compared to the passage in Luke when we read Mary's song.

The pain, questioning and lack of understanding must have been excruciating as she stood at the foot of the cross as her son, part of her own flesh and blood yet also the Son of God was nailed to the cross suffering one of the most brutal and cruel deaths. This was not the way the long awaited Messiah, her son, was supposed to rescue Israel and take up his right place.

And so we see Mary standing at the foot of the cross, in despair and sorrow, her heart torn in two.

Have you ever felt yourself standing at the foot of the cross, confused, full of questions, or your heart torn in two. Thinking "this isn't how it was supposed to be"? What great expectations have you had? Perhaps a job, a friendship, a holiday, a relationship, or your children. Like Mary, we too have expectations. Perhaps yours haven't turned out as you hoped. Have you ever felt let down by life?

I'd like to share with you one of my stories of expectation. On the 28 September 1999 Bethany Elizabeth was born, a beautiful little girl weighing just on 7 pounds. She completed our pigeon pair of children as we already had our little two year old Timothy. We were delighted. Life seemed perfect and we were looking forward to life with both of our children. We had expectations of what life would be like.

But on March 29 2000 my daughter had a prolonged epileptic seizure at 6 months of age. At the time I thought she was having an allergic reaction to the decongestant I had given her a few moments earlier. Thankfully the Ambulance officers were able to stop the seizure and Bethany was taken off in the ambulance to hospital where they conducted numerous tests. The conclusion of all this was that she had had an epileptic seizure and that we should medicate her. My husband and I were not keen to medicate our daughter after just one seizure so we decided to keep an eye on the situation and then react accordingly. One month to the day our daughter had another seizure and thus began our journey down a very different path. Bethany continued having seizures and would have multiple seizures in a day. Some of these seizures could be managed at home as they only lasted a couple of minutes and others went for a couple of hours and were only stopped through intravenous injections which effectively paralysed her whole system requiring her to be placed on ventilation support and stay in ICU while the medications wore off. The next few years were a mix of trialling medications and visits to the emergency department. Through out this time it became apparent that Bethany was not developing mentally as she should, there were no signs of babbling and she was falling further behind in her cognitive development. We had thought that this was due to the impact of the seizures and that they were slowing her down. In June 2001 we went to Westmead hospital for special test as her seizures were still not being controlled and she was developing a number of different types. The doctors felt that if they could pin point the starting point of the seizures then the possibility of surgery to correct this may be an option. This test involved her having electrodes stuck to her head for five days and being video taped so that the doctors could see exactly what was going on physically as well as what was going on in her brain.

It was at the end of this week that the doctors informed us that there were too many starting points in the brain and that surgery was not possible. They did not know what was causing the epilepsy and felt that her condition was part of a bigger condition. They also informed us that she had very slow brain waves and that she was significantly delayed and would never be able to attend mainstream schooling. This news was devastating. My husband and I expected that this may be the case but to hear it was soul destroying. None of the doctors knew why and none of them could tell us what we could expect or how far our daughter would cognitively develop. The next few months were very emotionally draining and I found myself in a fog. Over the next few years Bethany was given the diagnosis of Dravett's Syndrome or Severe Myoclonic Epilepsy of Infancy. This syndrome is quite rare and those with it appear to be fine at birth and then between 6 – 18 months begin having seizures. These seizures remain difficult to get under control, these children all have cognitive impairment with 50% having severe cognitive impairment. They also suffer from difficulties with gross motor activities. Bethany just turned six at the end of September and is in Kindergarten at Cranleigh special school. Thankfully her seizures have really settled down and she only tends to have one or two a week now and they only last for a few minutes. We are no longer having the emergency trips to the hospital. However Bethany does have severe cognitive impairment. At age 6 she still does not understand any verbal language and does not respond to her name, she is unable to speak. She can not spoon feed herself and is still in nappies she does not really know the purpose of many things. The best way to describe her is that mentally she is like an eight month old baby, on legs. Bethany is able to walk but needs assistance with climbing and walking on various surfaces. She is still our little girl and we love her dearly and she does bring us a lot of delight but things have not turned out at all as We expected, there will be no playing with barbies or arguments about what she can and can't wear as a teenager or watching her leave to study or find a partner someday. Instead we will always have our baby. I want to share an exert from my journal that I wrote three days after the tests we had done in Sydney.

Over the last 6 years I have found myself mourning for the daughter I thought I would have and questioning God and struggling with how my faith fit with what was going on in my life. My heart, like Mary's was torn in two. We share in common the heartache of motherhood. I have found myself many a time standing at the cross, hurting, confused, wondering what was going on, where was God and I am sure that there will be more times like this ahead.

I want to return to the story of Mary. We left her standing at the cross with Jesus making sure that someone would care for her once he was gone. We don't hear anymore about Mary until Acts 1:12-14 where we find Mary with the other disciples praying. Through all of the struggles, questions, fear heartache and changed expectations Mary has continued to faithfully follow her God. How has she managed to come through all of this and remain strong in her faith and trusting God? The testimony we heard from Pauline is similar in that throughout the unexpected heartache Pauline has suffered we hear her saying that she has grown in her faith, God has given her strength, she has felt blessed and she continues to faithfully follow him. It is not only the part of Mary's heart ache I want to relate to but also the ability to continue to follow God faithfully amidst the stuff of life.

How do we continue to follow God when things aren't going as we expect, when we feel hurt, angry, confused or wonder where God is?

Turn to God with your questions. Tell him how you feel. Allow yourself to feel. The Bible is full of lament and despair and people questioning God. Try reading Job, the Psalms and Lamentations for a start. Journaling can also be a very useful way to express your questions and feelings.

Read the Bible. There you will find stories of others who struggle as well as find words of comfort and hope.

Find a supportive church environment where you can ask your questions and express your doubt. You need somewhere to feel safe when you are feeling vulnerable with all that is going on.

Allow your community to carry you through these difficult times. Allow your community to pray for you and care for you.

Allow others to be the "skin" of Jesus to you. Let go of expectations that you always have to cope and let others help.

Be wary of well meaning people. I have found that most people have an opinion on why something has happened to you. Test what you hear with the Bible and the character of God.

There isn't an easy answer to all of this, but there is encouragement in hearing the story of Mary and others in the Bible as well as the stories of one another. My prayer for you is that when you find your expectations changed and life is difficult that you too may find hope in the story of Mary and others who have walked similar paths and yet remain faithful followers of Jesus.