

## ALL GENERATIONS WILL CALL HER BLESSED

Isaiah 6. 10-11

Galatians 4. 4-7

Luke 1. 46-55

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Our given text this morning, which is commonly known as the *Magnificat* or the Song of Mary, is the greatest of all the Canticles in the gospels. In it, Mary has two preoccupations: the first is to magnify the Lord and to rejoice in him as her Saviour; and secondly, to identify herself with the poor, the weak, the hungry and the lowly of the Lord, who confidently look to God to be exalted and filled with good things. Indeed, this type of divine blessing has now just become part of Mary's personal experience. In her hymn of praise, she acknowledges what God has done for her; and in it, she utters a bold prophecy by saying, 'Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed'.

But why do we call Mary blessed? There are two reasons, and this twofold answer is given to us the verses that immediately precede our gospel text; in them, Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary and the mother of St John the Baptist, utters some very significant truths about Mary.

Firstly, Elizabeth says 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb'. Mary's vocation was absolutely unique and mind-bogglingly paradoxical in its implications. Since the fifth century<sup>1</sup> the Church has recognised Mary as *Theotokos*, a Greek word sometimes translated as Mother of God, but which can be more precisely translated as God-bearer, or the one who gives birth to the Word of God incarnate. Yes, *Theotokos* is a high and glorious title; but it was not adopted for the

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<sup>1</sup> The Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

purpose of giving honour to Mary; it was adopted in order to make perfectly clear the Church's teaching about the Incarnation of our Lord as one Person who is wholly divine and wholly human. To deny that Mary is *Theotokos* is either to deny that her Son is divine, or to separate his divinity and his humanity; and therefore to deny the oneness of the Person of Christ.

Of course, the title *Theotokos* does give honour to Mary. She is blessed because the fruit of her womb is blessed. She has received the amazing and unique grace of being the Mother of the Messiah. She was, and she is the Mother of God incarnate; God entered our world and took his human nature from Mary, so that he is now not only the Son of God but also the Son of Mary, Emmanuel; 'God-with-us'. And since Mary's Son retains his humanity for ever, Mary also for ever remains his Mother.

But secondly, Elizabeth goes on to say, 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' Mary here is greeted as a woman of faith and indeed as a model of faith.<sup>2</sup>

As you and I know, God treats his sons and daughters with immense courtesy. He always takes the initiative; his grace is sovereign; but he always respects our human freedom and waits for our free response, as he did in the case of Mary.

So when Mary heard that terrifying message from the Angel Gabriel, nothing happened (even though the salvation of the world depended upon it) until Mary had given her 'Yes' to God. 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' It was Mary's faith, her humility, her obedience, her total openness to God and to God's will that made that 'Yes' possible. Mary was no passive, impersonal instrument; no surrogate female lending her womb; since she

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<sup>2</sup> Mary is an explicit contrast to Elizabeth's husband Zechariah, who became temporarily dumb after he failed to respond in faith, trust and commitment to the Angel's word.

was destined to be Mother in the fullest sense (psychological and spiritual as well as physical), her full, willing acceptance and co-operation in faith were necessary.

God knocked at the door of Mary's heart, just as God knocks at the doors of our hearts. But he does not force the door. Everything is done gently, without threats or bullying; without thunder or lightning; and only we can open the latch from the inside.

You may remember that one day, a woman in the crowd cried out to our Lord, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' And Jesus replied, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it' (Lk 11. 28). Christ was in no way turning honour away from his Mother. On the contrary, he was pointing out that quality in Mary that does not separate her from us. Rather, she provides us with a model that we can, and must imitate. St Luke points out over and over again that Mary heard and pondered and meditated on the word of God; she kept it in her heart and obeyed it willingly and totally. As one of the early Christian Fathers pointed out, 'Before she conceived the Word of God in her womb, she harboured it in her mind and heart'.

So as we hear this second word of Elizabeth, 'Blessed is she who believed', let us set take Mary's faith and obedience to be a model. And when we hear the first word, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb', let us remember one thing. Although there is only one Mother of God, yet the whole Church and every baptised Christian is called upon, in a sense, to be *Theotokos*. We are called to carry Christ our God within us and to bring him forth to the world in which we live.

How do we carry Christ our God within us? We have the privilege of doing so thanks to the presence of the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. In one of his

epistles<sup>3</sup>, St Paul states that this same Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, has been given to us literally as a 'seal'; we who believe have been given the Holy Spirit as a 'pledge' of the inheritance we receive from our Father.

And how do we bring forth Christ to the world in which we live? We can do so by being his eyes, his hands, and his feet; as we reach out to those who are around us and show them his love. They might be one of our next-door neighbours; they might be one of our work colleagues; they might even be family members. Let me reassure you: as we make conscious decisions to show the love of God to those around us, it will not go unnoticed. It cannot go unnoticed.

We can also bring forth Christ to the world in which we live by being his mouth, as we speak of him to others; and as we pray for those who need a fresh experience of his grace, mercy, provision and love. Let me say straight away that I realise that most of us would probably say that we do not feel particularly comfortable about speaking about God to others. I'm reminded of a colleague of mine, a priest in Paris no less, who found himself one day taking a train from London to St Alban's. As he settled into his seat, my colleague was greeted by a man who was sitting across from him; and discovering that they both were going to stop at the same destination, the man said, 'You know, I've never really believed in God. But we have 20 minutes ahead of us. You have 20 minutes to convince me.' To which my colleague sheepishly replied, 'I've never been very good at sales.'

Even though the idea of speaking about God to others may terrify us, there *are* some things that we can do that are both practical and possible. We can develop friendships with people and take a sincere interest in them. We can ask them questions, and listen with a spirit of caring as they share about their lives; and when it is appropriate, we can even say that we are praying for them. Who knows? We

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Eph 1. 13-14.

might find that God leads us to invite them to come with us one Sunday to St Stephen's; or he might use us to bring them a message of hope; or to give them reassurance of God's love *for them*; or to encourage them to start an exciting new chapter of their lives as they include God in it.

Today, we join countless other Christians and the Christian Church-at-large as we call Mary blessed. We remember that the fruit of her womb is blessed, and we bless her for her faithful response to God's invitation. May we also resolve this day to follow her example, to carry Christ our God within us and to bring him forth to the world in which we live.

Amen.