

Advent 4B, 21st December, 2008
Luke 1:26-38; Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55)
Bearing God

Rev Robyn Boyd

The Christmas Card industry is as usual going full bore. They're everywhere – in the shops, on the net, in our letter boxes and of course on our mantelpieces or hung in the slots of our Venetian blinds. Some of them even have a religious focus –leaving Christ in Christmas; others – well –a bit of colourful froth and bubble that try to pick up the joyful or holiday fun side that Christmas has become.

But have a think about the picture of the holy family on your Christmas cards. Think about the Mary that's usually shown. Not just that she's usually fair-skinned – there doesn't seem to be many authentic Marys with dark skin of middle eastern appearance on the cards. There's a serenity about her –there she is, in the cattle shed, peacefully cradling the new-born Jesus, not looking at all like she's just ridden on a donkey for about 100 kilometers, heavily pregnant at that; not looking like she's just been in labour. (Of course, we don't get to hear those sorts of details from the Gospel compilers –being men!)

What would it have been like for Mary? We can't know, of course, but we can fill in some gaps. We can have a pretty good guess that she would have had some tough and anxious moments as her pregnancy unfolded. We do have some good glimpses of what community life was back then in the first century. It's probable that Mary was about 14 years old. It's probable that she was a virgin – there were some very strong cultural morals against unmarried people having sex; and it was a source of great shame to become pregnant outside formal marriage. In the ancient Mediterranean world of that time, if a woman had been sexually violated by a man –even if it was against her will –she could be killed. There was even a specific penalty commanded by scripture – stoning to death; that's if her father or brothers didn't get to her first. A shame like a pregnancy outside of marriage –especially when the woman was betrothed to someone other the father – was the sort of disgrace that could cut a family off from community life. A betrothal, and the marriage, wasn't something between two individuals, it was an agreement or contract between two extended families. So it can't have been easy for this 14 year girl to reveal her pregnancy. You know what we'd make of a story like hers: "Oh yeah?" We'd say. "An angel? As if!" Joseph's initial response was pretty much like that –he was troubled enough to decide that he would "dismiss her quietly. In the end Joseph came through, believing the angel's revelation to himself that this child would be Emmanuel, God with us.

And then there's Mary's "virginity". Apart from the ambiguous translation of "virgin" – a word in Greek which also means "young woman", the point to highlight about Mary as virgin isn't the old RC doctrine about her needing to be pure in order to bear Christ – not at all –in fact, there's a stronger point about God choosing someone very lowly, someone quite unknown from a dusty little village, a very ordinary young girl from an ordinary family, who would always carry the whiff of something being not quite proper about her son's conception.

And pushing the point further: not only is God breaking down expectations, even rules, about the sort of people God would choose to be his agents, he's tearing apart physical and physiological rules of human conception. A living, breathing, walking, talking God you could have a personal relationship with, let alone being born as a helpless baby, was outside the bounds. Divinity just didn't act like that: it was inconceivable. Play that phrase around in your mind: this conception was inconceivable!

This conversation we read in the Gospel today, between the angel and Mary, tells us something quite earth-shattering. God, for whom nothing is impossible, wants humanity to be part of God's plans in saving the world, to take part in the fulfillment of his promises to establish a kingdom of peace and justice on earth. What God is doing is calling us into his plans, even if it makes it more complicated and even difficult – we note this is a God who really could do anything, could do all of this on his own. But he chooses to draw Mary, and all of us, into what he's doing. Not like a puppeteer controlling us, but extending an invitation to us into his work of drawing humankind to himself, breaking down barriers between God and humanity, inviting us to share his very life. This God is not willing to do this behind our backs or without our participation.

The myriad of religious laws, intended to draw people towards God and to draw them further into holy living, had become burdens and barriers to the relationship God intended to have with his creation. So now, through this little girl, he's breaking right into his created world. We know through the Gospel stories that Jesus was forever upsetting the religious authorities by his breaking of religious rules- like healing on the Sabbath, eating with the marginalized and getting around with religious outsiders...but here, in this story of his conception, can you see that he is upsetting the rules even before he's born?

This God is simply not willing to act like the sort of God people throughout history imagine a God should be like. The people at the time of Christ held God in awe, 'up there', and sought to please him through the Temple ritual and religious law. A God who liked them and desired personal relationship was an alien idea. And in our time, many people –even some in the Church – have constructed an idea of God as benign, ineffectual or, alternatively, as a distant, stern, wrathful task master ready to find fault and catch us out. And when you think about it, isn't it safer to keep God at a distance, out there somewhere, impersonal, rather than have him really involved in a personal way in creation, in the world, in our lives? Goodness knows what he might ask us to do. He might even choose us to be bearers of his life now.

What we see here of God in Mary's story is this God who is with us – Emmanuel; who comes to us, joins us in our world, even to the point of choosing a nobody to bear him and to eventually be born in a grotty barn, defying accepted social values, breaking rules and expectations. That's radical; that's counter-cultural, then and now.

Mary could have said "no", but she didn't. She said "here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word". Mary took a leap of faith; not without questions, not without pondering; probably not without some apprehension.

So as we gaze on the unreal, serene Mary on our Christmas cards, we can wonder what it was like for her. But, what about for us? How do we get drawn into this story? More often than not, people fight against it –it does go against expectations, it does go against rationality. A God who invites us to both participate with him in his plans for creation but whom we also are called to serve, goes against a culture where self is put first.

But in this story, it's not just Mary who's invited to bear the life of God. We, too, can agree to smuggle God into the world inside our own bodies, our own selves and lives. Even baby Zeb, who is being baptised today, is invited to bear God in his life. The mark of baptism calls him into this life of bearing God. And at some point he will have to attend to his own response to this calling, like all of us.

The fourteenth century mystic, Meister Eckhart writes: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his son in the fullness of time if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? Then, then, is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten in us"

The question for all of us to ponder on as we await the birth of the Christ child: How are we bearing God in ourselves and in this world?