

---

# Being like Mary

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 13 August 2023

Isaiah 7:10-15 • Galatians 4:4-7 • Luke 1:39-56

---



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today we celebrate our patronal festival, or should I say maternal festival: the feast of St Mary. We remember the woman who said “Yes!” to the angel who came to tell her she would bear our Lord Jesus. Her readiness to accept God’s plan for her and her willingness to serve both God and God’s people deserve to be celebrated. She is an example to us all of faith, humility and servanthood.

This is the third St Mary’s church I have served in! Merivale, Timaru and now Halswell. And there are a couple of other St Mary’s around here, another Anglican one in Addington, and the Catholic pro-cathedral in town. It’s a popular name for churches. Mary used to be a popular name for baby girls. It doesn’t seem to have been so popular in the last 30-40 years though; I know very few Marys under the age of 50. My mother was named Mary Lou, but she always went by Lou — she didn’t use Mary except when she was signing official documents, like checks.

(There aren't too many checks around any more either! Gone with the Marys, I guess.)

Among Catholics the name Mary is particularly popular for naming churches. In the state of Arkansas in the US, 1 out of every 4 Catholic churches is named after Mary, most of them simply St Mary; but some are called Our Lady of something, such as Our Lady of the Holy Souls in Little Rock, Arkansas (the state capital). In New Zealand we have a number of St Mary's. Saint Mary's Anglican Church in New Plymouth is the oldest stone church in New Zealand. St Mary's in Tikitiki (on the East Cape, north of Gisborne) serves as a memorial to the Maori men from the East Coast who fought and died in the First World War.

Mary is important because of who she is and what she did, in heeding and welcoming God's call. As Anglicans, we do not worship her, but we recognise her worth. The Archangel Gabriel greeted her as the "highly favoured one" and told her she had "found favour with God" (Luke 1:28,30). Only a few humans are so designated and so honoured. Abraham was one; his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, and God promised to make his name great (Gen 12:2). He became the father of nations and is revered by his descendants to this day. Saul was anointed by Samuel at God's command; he was the leader of the Israelites after they demanded a human king be placed over them. But Saul did not serve God faithfully; and the crown, and God's favour, passed to David. David was specially chosen out of all his brothers and became a great king; he too was imperfect, but God forgave him. David's son, Solomon, was specially blessed by God, who was pleased that Solomon desired wisdom above all material wealth. He too proved to be imperfect, but God was faithful to him until he died.

But Mary never let God down. To be sure, there is not a lot of material on Mary; we don't really know that much about her, but she served God through bearing and raising his Son, and when he died, she wept at the foot of the cross. She remained faithful to the end. We know that she was betrothed to Joseph, who was also visited by the angel and told how she would bear the Messiah. We know of Joseph's faith as well, in not putting Mary away when he learned she was with child. Human beings are never perfect, but Joseph and Mary served God faithfully and well, and so they are an example to all of us.

So we mark the Feast of St Mary. But that's just one day a year. How might we keep the spirit and the example of Mary alive throughout the year?

We may remain open to God's call on us. We generally learn what God wants of us through prayer. Prayer need not be only an occasional practice, weekly in church or daily when we rise or when we go to bed. Prayer may be constant. We may follow Paul's advice to

rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Praying constantly sounds difficult, but it's just a matter of "checking in" with God multiple times a day. It is referring all the little decisions you make, all the ideas you have, to God, as if you were discussing them with a person standing next to you. It is giving thanks for little things going well — or even for the things that don't go well, but might have been worse! In doing this, we may stay open to God's call, and when God decides to speak to us, we will hear.

We may also stay open to those around us. Remember that when the shepherds found the manger and told Mary about the angels appearing to them, Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Listen to the people you meet, for you may learn how you may serve them. Mary was a good listener, and if we emulate her, we may better follow Jesus' second great commandment to love others as we love ourselves.

We may not all have calls as weighty as Mary's, or Abraham's. Our calls may be to quite ordinary things: working in a hospital or driving a bus or teaching school or serving food in a restaurant. God needs all kinds of people in this world to supply the needs of his people. God knows what we want and what we need, as Jesus said when he was speaking of the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Every honest occupation is valuable in God's world; the key to it all is doing as Mary did when she was called: saying "yes!"

Mary was a woman of faith, obedient to God, loving to her family and others, and was chosen by God for these reasons to bring his Son to us. On our own faith journeys, we do well to keep her example in mind, as we live and serve in God's world. Through him who was born of a woman and died to save all women and men, amen.