

MESSAGE – Daring to say ‘yes’ to God

How well do we know the Christmas story?

We’ve all heard the Christmas story before.

Most of us have heard it many times.

But how much of it is true and how much is tradition that’s been added on?

Take a good look at this picture and try to remember the details of the story. Here’s a short quiz to help us sort out the sheep from the donkeys ...!

1. When Mary was told she was going to have a baby, were she and Joseph
 - a) Just good friends?
 - b) Engaged to be married?
 - c) Recently married?
2. How did Mary get to Bethlehem?
 - a) She and Joseph walked
 - b) She rode a donkey
 - c) We don’t know
3. What did the innkeeper say to Mary and Joseph?
 - a) ‘Come in, you’re very welcome’
 - b) ‘I can give you the honeymoon suite’
 - c) ‘The place is full, but there’s a stable out the back’
 - d) We don’t know
4. When did the baby Jesus cry?
 - a) When he saw the presents from the wise men
 - b) When he was hungry
 - c) When he needed his nappy changed
 - d) He didn’t cry at all
5. How many angels spoke to the shepherds in the field?
 - a) One
 - b) A multitude
 - c) Nobody knows

6. What is a 'heavenly host'?
 - a) A choir of angels
 - b) A group of saints
 - c) An army
 - d) Nobody knows

7. What song did the angels sing?
 - a) Joy to the world
 - b) Hark! The herald angels sing
 - c) Glory to God in the highest
 - d) None of these

8. So where was Jesus born?
 - a) In a stable
 - b) In a house
 - c) In a cave

9. Which animals were there when baby Jesus was born?
 - a) A donkey
 - b) Cows
 - c) Sheep
 - d) Camels

10. How many wise men were there?
 - a) Two
 - b) Three
 - c) Four
 - d) We don't know

11. Who were the wise men? What was their job?
 - a) They were kings from the East
 - b) They were magicians
 - c) They were astrologers
 - d) We don't know

12. When the wise men brought their gifts, where did they find Jesus?
- a) In a house
 - b) In a stable
 - c) In a manger
 - d) We don't know

Answers

- 1: They were engaged to be married
- 2: The Bible doesn't say how they got to Bethlehem. There's no mention of a donkey.
- 3: There is no mention of any innkeeper in the Gospel accounts
- 4: We don't know. But he was a human baby and cried sometimes
- 5: According to Luke's account, only one angel spoke
- 6: In the Bible, a 'heavenly host' normally refers to an army
- 7: None of these. They sang 'Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'
- 8: We don't know. The Bible only says that he was laid in a manger
- 9: The Bible doesn't mention any animals at all
- 10: We don't know. The Bible mentions three gifts but doesn't say how many wise men brought them
- 11: Magi were men who suited nature, including the stars.
- 12: The Bible says they found Jesus in a house

Having cleared up some of the cultural additions to the Christmas story, it's time now to consider our reading about Mary – who is a somewhat neglected figure in Protestant faith – probably in reaction against her elevated status in the Catholic Church where she is often viewed as the key mediator between sinful humanity and a holy God in heaven.

For many of us, though, Mary is simply the biological mother of Jesus and who, having given birth to Jesus, rapidly fades from view. For the Gospel writer Luke, though, Mary is more than this. She is a prophetic voice for the message of good news (through her song the Magnificat) as well as a model disciple. She is held up as someone to imitate. Yet so often Christian art has presented her as completely passive and in a permanent state of post-natal daze.

Let's reflect on her encounter with Gabriel, first from the perspective of Gabriel and then from Mary's perspective. These reflections come from Sally Mann from the Iona Community.



She was so young. Too young.

But it's not my job to have opinions. My job is to deliver news.

I thought she would run when I walked into her home. It would have been a reasonable thing to do.

I've got used to odd human reactions to my presence. But this girl was cool. She was so composed that at first I thought she was stupid. She just looked at me without blinking.

But then I saw it was her courage. Men four times her age rarely have her self-awareness. She was nobody's fool.

I told her that she was chosen and blessed and then I asked her my question. She didn't seem very impressed. She kept me standing there as she sat down at the table. She sighed like a woman twice her age ... who already knew what it would cost.

Something within me hoped that she would say 'no'.

She looked down at the table for a long time before she answered.

Then Mary's perspective ...

No one ever listens to girls. Not in my world. No one listens when we have something to say. No one believes us when we report something amazing. No one believes us when we get used and abused.

I was by the fireplace when it happened, making bread. It was one of my daily tasks for the family. ... I heard a noise ... it sounded like feet on gravel. Then I heard an unfamiliar voice, clear, that could have been a man's voice or a

woman's voice. A single word: 'Hello'. Then a face poked in through the door. I think it was a young face ... no beard. But I can't be sure.

I wasn't scared when the person walked in.

I should have been. I should have run.

But I stood my ground, and when they spoke it was a kind voice.

'Mary, I've got something to ask you'.

They knew my name! Might have got it from someone, but somehow I knew they hadn't.

'Who are you?' I asked. 'You already know' they replied.

And I did. I figured that this person was God's messenger, an angel.

'What do you say? Will you say yes?'

I had felt the stirrings of womanhood in me for months. My mother had told me what to expect. The itching in my chest. The stab in my belly. The blood that would come.

I knew what was being asked. I said, 'Why me?'

The angel shrugged.

I had questions of my own. 'Will they hate me?' 'Will they hate the child?'

I stared. I waited.

'Will you do it?' the angel asked again.

I gave the answer I knew I'd regret later. I said 'yes'.

In some ways we are all a bit like Mary. We're **ordinary people** ... who can be courageous at times, faithful, prayerful and persevering ... and like Mary, we have questions about the way God works. The challenge is whether we will dare to follow Mary's example of faith and courage and say 'yes' to what God might ask of us. That's the extraordinary opportunity and blessing that we've each been given.

The focus of the story, though, is clearly on the **son** that Mary will bear. That's why Luke has an angel announce the birth along with other hints that point to an extraordinary birth.

The angel's words suggest that a **great** person is to be born ... a **king** to rule on David's throne over an **everlasting** kingdom ... a person who will have a unique relationship with God ... who will be called both **Holy One** and **Son of God**. Further prophecies are spoken at Jesus' birth and at his presentation at the temple a week

later. All of these suggest the arrival of a special person, one to surpass even the great Jewish hero King David as well as the Roman Emperor. For both Jewish and Gentile audiences the message is clear – Jesus is someone through whom God will work – powerfully.

These are also words of **grace**. From very ordinary circumstances, God will raise up an extraordinary person who will bring God's presence and love into the world in a powerful new way – not from a throne or palace in Jerusalem – but through daily interactions with ordinary people.

Coming back to Mary, perhaps we think it would be easy to say 'yes' to God when the task involves someone extraordinary like Jesus.

Yet Mary had no idea where her choice would lead and probably sometimes wished that God had chosen someone else for the role. It often takes our very best ability – our **availability** – to say 'yes'.

I'd like to close by reading through the Luke reading again with you – but changing it slightly, with you taking the role of Mary and responding with the words in **bold**. Are you prepared to give it a go? ...

Greetings, favoured ones!

The Lord is with you and intends to do great things through you.

How can this be? We're just ordinary, everyday people.

Yet you have found favour with God, and the Holy Spirit will guide you and work through you to reshape this world and help the people God loves so much. For nothing is impossible with God.

Here we are, servants of the Lord.

Let it be with us according to God's word.

May this be our prayer as we move through the Christmas season and then into a new year.

In the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

