

Sermon for Great St Mary's
Patronal Festival
Birth of the BVM
10 September 2023

Readings: Micah 5.1-4; Luke 5.33-39

What are the great yes-es of your life? And did they come easily or did you have a bit of a struggle? I remember signing up for the *19th annotation*, an Ignatian retreat in daily life that can last up to 9 months, as I recall, a good gestatory period. That seemed a long time to me and I was worried I could keep it up. I was in my 20s and still finding my way towards faith, so I was slightly worried I might have an atheist period in the middle. 9 months was a lot of commitment to God.

But it ended up being one of the best things I've ever done. I *loved* it, and instead of having difficulty sustaining interest, my difficulty was finishing, and no longer having a spiritual director to guide my prayer with Ignatian, imaginative exercises. I had to sustain it myself, and that took adjustment.

I also took a while to say yes to the man who is now my husband (who's sitting over there...). We were together six years before we decided we would indeed tie the knot. Our friends had worked out that we were perfect for each other, it seems, but it took us a little longer. 'Til death us do part' just seemed a very long time. What if we stopped liking each other between now and then? Could we actually keep our vows? Could we live it? And then almost immediately after we married we said, this is *great*. WHY DIDN'T WE DO IT BEFORE?

And the third example of my yes-saying is of giving birth to our son, whom we left off to Edinburgh yesterday, by the way, to begin his university education, so I'm feeling somewhat bereft. Well, that too seemed like a tremendous amount of commitment and we circled round whether we were up for it for a while. After deciding yes, a friend of mine said of my impending motherhood: what you have ahead of you are the greatest joys and the greatest pains you'll ever have. And she was right.

Well, we are commemorating a birth today, that of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is best known for her saying yes to God.

We celebrate the Annunciation on 25 March, of course, yet that great yes-saying in the middle of Mary's life stretches back to give meaning to its beginning, as well as forward to define its end.

And my guess is that Mary would agree that being the mother of God gave her the greatest joy and the greatest pain she'd ever have. Opening herself to love, to God, led to extraordinary levels of both. We hear about the suffering that precedes redemption in Micah today, for a besieged people, and we can perhaps begin to imagine Mary's suffering as Jesus died on the cross. And we can also imagine the joy of being a new mother, of living out her calling and being at one with God.

It is this very humanity, with its joys and sufferings, and perhaps also Mary's humble beginnings, also highlighted in Micah, that makes her like us, relatable, and it is remarkable how much she continues to speak to us, including in this place, dedicated to her.

Perhaps our commitment to Mary also demonstrates our longing for the feminine to be incorporated in our worship, to balance things out a bit, to make the incarnation more fully human.

Let's remember, the Incarnation was something entirely new, and this new wine required new wineskins, as our gospel reading reminds us, and that new wine came to us, not through the prophetic word of a man, as in the past, but through a much more gendered, utterly female, utterly sexual part: the Word is birthed by Mary and made flesh. God brought the spirit to bodily life through Mary in a way that values all life, male and female, ethereal and bodily, spiritual and sexual. So it's good news for all of us, not just women, and not just mothers.

This year I led an inclusive writing workshop for WATCH, Women and the Church, that celebrated Mary. And there, we noted that for some women, she is rather hard to relate to. Perhaps that's some of you here today, so let's look at some of the difficulties she poses us.

Firstly, we may say, how can I relate to a virgin who gave birth? Who can emulate that? Ruth

Gledhill, the online editor of the Tablet, asks, is this despair at being faced with a holy perfection we can't emulate a by-product of capitalism? Of our ultra-competitive age? Social media, she notes, fosters a spirit of 'compare and despair' rather than celebrating each person as unique and equal, of vital importance for society.¹ That's worth having a think about.

Secondly, for some, Mary's inspiring yes came a bit too easily to be relatable.

Well, I suggest two ways of thinking about this. Firstly, all kinds of small yeses may have preceded this: instead of a need to control outcomes,² perhaps Mary had developed a nature that was ready to say yes, to be open to the new and unexpected idea, to adventure. We can all work at growing this response to our everyday decisions and suggestions, at practicing yes.

Secondly, at my WATCH workshop, a contributor suggested, *No* is so creative, what is always in the background to a yes is a no. It is the no that opens the gate to the yes. That's quite a

¹ "Tablet weekly online update" email 15 August 2023.

² Ruth Gledhill. *Ibid.*

liberating thought, I think. The story, the artwork representing the Annunciation, do not foreground the no, but perhaps it is there all the same, as it was in my yes-es, as it is, perhaps, in all our yes-es.

And then there is the suggestion that Mary's characterization as obedient and subservient jars with modern expectations of gender roles and how we should live our lives.

I suggest this is perhaps a question of marketing, of framing the costly self-giving of our foremother in faith³ into something that sat more easily with our patriarchal forebears.

Denise Levertov treats this very issue in her poem *Annunciation*.⁴

"..we are told of meek obedience. No one mentioned courage...

She was free
To accept or to refuse, choice
Integral to humanness...

³ Nicola Slee, *The Book of Mary*, SPCK 2007:14.

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/2434-annunciation>, accessed 19 Mar 23.

is joining your choir, both of whom will be commissioned today.

What are the yeses that we are open to in our lives? What yes might God be calling *you* to today?

Amen