

Followers of the Way

The poor and lowly - couldn't God have made a better choice?

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Lk 1: 26-38

You can imagine the conversation, can't you, when God told Gabriel he was to go and tell Mary she was going to have a child – and not just any old child, but God's own Son!

'Seriously, God?' says Gabriel. 'She's thirteen and not yet married. She hasn't even taken her GCSEs - and by the way, her predicted grades aren't great. And the guy she's betrothed to ... have you seen him? He's a carpenter, for heaven's sake ... from Galilee!'

Okay, bit of an invention with the level of Mary's schooling, but you get the picture. Both Mary and Joseph came from Nazareth, a town in Galilee. As a region Galilee was rural and a bit of a backwater, made up of agrarian villages, so that most of the people would have been farmers or fishermen, and they were known as being very 'traditional', i.e. they wouldn't have held with the new-fangled ideas of Herod and the ruling elite. And in the main, they would have spoken Aramaic – not Greek, which again would have marked them as distinctly lower class. So, somewhere solid and honest ... but a bit 'underdeveloped' and lacking in sophistication.

And this is where Jesus' family came from. Ordinary people ... nothing special ... maybe a bit rough and ready. Although Mary's cousin, of course, was married to a priest, which in their society was maybe a bit 'special'. But Mary herself, as well as this background, was very young, with nothing it seems very distinctive about her – apart from the fact she got pregnant before she was married. So why on earth did God choose her?

Well, we know that Mary had a very deep faith. When Gabriel breaks the news she's going to give birth to a son, she's understandably a bit puzzled, because she is, after all, still a virgin. But Gabriel assures her (v.37) that with God nothing is impossible, and she appears completely satisfied, '... let it be with me according to your word.'

This is one very brave girl, because she would have known immediately how this unexplained and premature pregnancy would look to those around her. She would have known that Joseph was likely to break the betrothal, and that she would face complete social ostracization on the part of her neighbours. She'd have known she could be branded a whore and cast out. But she trusted. I think the truth is not just that God chose Mary to be the mother of His Son when she was around 13, but that this was what He had intended and created her for all along. This was the reason she herself was born.

Jeremiah 1:5 'Before you were in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.' Time and again, in the Bible, we see this idea of divine election and calling. Indeed, we've seen it earlier in Luke in the announcement of both Jesus' and John the Baptist's future births – and this, I think, points to a profound truth for all of us. We all have free will, because God – unlike Satan – never seeks to impose control and gives us choice. But for each and every one of us there is actually a calling in life – something that we are divinely appointed to, and, indeed, that only we *can* do.

But what is also very clear from the Bible is just how frequently God chooses to use the losers – the feeble, the failures, the untouchables, the sinners ... the stone that the builders rejected. A good illustration of this is the anointing of David by Samuel in 1 Samuel 16, where the prophet is sent by the Lord to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the next king over Israel. V.3 God tells Samuel, '... you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' Now Jesse had 8 sons in all, and Samuel thought the oldest sons looked pretty impressive. It's got to be one of them, he thought. But God said of the oldest, 'do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see...'. Then he rejected the following 7, leaving Samuel wondering what to do. But at the last moment, Jesse summoned his youngest son, still a child, who was out looking after the sheep in the fields, and we read, 'The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him: for this is the one."' (v.12).

The thing is, God doesn't see as we see, and He doesn't judge as we judge. Rather, He sees what's in the heart, and what we can become. And where he chooses, he trains, equips and provides. Whenever and wherever the Lord calls, we can be assured that He will supply all we need. All that's needed is that we rely on Him and trust.

But, back to Mary. I think there can be no doubt that she had not just been chosen, but born, precisely so that she could give birth to the Saviour, and her character was such that, despite all the hurdles she would have seen lying ahead, she immediately obeyed. But that doesn't mean there wouldn't have been difficult times ahead, of course – times when maybe the thought crept in, 'I can't do this ... Joseph is going to abandon me. My parents have stopped speaking to me ... What am I going to do?'

Maybe there were even times when, despite Gabriel's reassurance, Mary cried in the night. She was just a girl, after all – and of course giving birth was just the start of things, and there was infinitely worse to come, because this 'ordinary' girl was one day going to see her beloved son crucified. Remember Simeon's prophecy in Lk 2: 35 '... a sword will pierce your own soul.'

And the same can surely be said for Joseph. He obeyed God and struggled to keep his young family safe – but did those around him think he was a bit of an idiot and make fun of him? After all, a real man wouldn't have put up with Mary's behaviour, would he? A 'real' man would have divorced her. We know that that was exactly what Joseph was tempted to do, until God intervened. But it must have taken real strength to obey – strength which maybe even Joseph, at the time, didn't know he had. Because sometimes, the things God calls us to aren't easy and can bring us almost to breaking point. Sometimes we can face shipwreck, like Paul, caught in the storm and washed up half dead on the beach; or, like Lot, who found himself forced to flee the place he'd

called home, and whose wife died. But, while we remain faithful, the one thing we can know with absolute certainty is that God will provide for us and bring us through. More than that, He'll bless us and, at the last, He'll bring us home.

At this point in history, we're undeniably living in difficult and dangerous times. We've got wars going on in the Ukraine and the Middle East, growing violence on our streets, the threat of financial collapse, panic about climate change, and, underlying all, what looks like the disintegration of society. But God has not given up on us. As He comes closer – and I do believe that now He's very close – the confusion, chaos, abuse, and violence that we're seeing all around, will only intensify, because evil is tightening its grip ahead of the final confrontation. But God is sovereign, and He has His plans in place – and, unlikely as it may seem, those plans include us. In the eyes of the world, we maybe look poor and lowly – useless 'never-beens', with delusional beliefs. But God uses the poor and lowly – the unlikely – to carry out His will.

When the Lord returns there will be judgment, and those who've rejected Him will be cast, along with Satan, into the fire. But God doesn't want anyone to be lost. Two thousand years ago, He sent His only Son to break Satan's hold and restore us to direct relationship with Himself. As we all know, since Christ's death and resurrection, we have had a time of dispensation, in order to allow every man, woman and child on earth a chance to hear the good news and repent. That time is now almost over, but God is still reaching out to the lost. While there's yet time. And that's where we come in, because whether we realise it or not, we have each one of us been chosen and trained for precisely this time, and God is calling us now to stand, and go in search of the lost.

Just like Mary, we can't know the end from the beginning, and none of us can know what lies ahead in our own lives, let alone what's coming down the track for the world. But we have been born for this time, and no matter how insignificant we might feel, we can and must make a difference.

1. Is it true that God calls the 'unlikely' to carry out His will, and have you ever felt called to do something that seemed beyond you?
2. When society seems hell-bent on redefining itself, how can it be restored to 'health', and what is our part in that?
3. At Jesus' command, a small group of disciples spread the news of His death and resurrection across the world. How do we continue the Great Commission today?