

Mary's story

Although it was a long time ago, it's as clear as if it was yesterday! It was such an unlikely thing. If I'd known all that would happen, would I have said: "Yes"?

I was all set to marry Joseph, expecting my life would be like every other woman in the village – creating a home for children, catching up with friends at the well, looking out for my parents as they got older, and, of course, cherishing Joseph. And I suppose that all these things did happen; but so much more.

It was strange when we took Jesus to the Temple for my purification ceremony when he was such a small baby. That old man Simeon recognised something special in my baby. But he told me that a sword would pierce my very soul¹. I hadn't a clue what he meant. But I know now.

He grew into such a fine young man. He was a thinker. A questioner. And a speaker. People would come from all over to listen to him. And it was amazing how he'd touch people who were ill and they'd recover. Everybody loved him. Not everyone, of course. He got right up the noses of the Pharisees!

But I never thought it would come to such an early end. It's hard to even go there. My loving, lovely boy, hanging on a cross like a criminal. When the centurion thrust his sword into his body² I really understood what Simeon had meant. I wished I could have taken his place. It felt as though everything had come to an end. I don't know how I kept going. Everyone was very supportive – they were grieving too – and John became my surrogate son. That Sabbath was the blackest there's ever been.

We weren't even able to prepare his body for burial.

What a long wait that was. I was numb. With shock and sorrow. I didn't know how I could go on living. People came and went. Some sat and wept with me. They offered me food, but I couldn't even think about eating.

But I did think back to the beginning. Had I imagined Gabriel's visit³? It was so long ago. I was so young. But it had felt real enough then. Such an extraordinary thing. This visitation. Like a human, but somehow unlike. And there was I – a young girl from an insignificant family – being addressed as someone really special, in a poetic kind of way: "Good morning!" Gabriel said, appearing from nowhere. "You're beautiful with God's beauty. Beautiful inside and out! God be with you."

I remember the astonishment I felt. And I guess I was afraid too. But they were very reassuring. They knew my name. "Mary", they said. "You've nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus." And then there was more. About him becoming a king whose kingdom would last forever. It was so bewildering.

I remember blurting out the first thing that came into my head: "But how? I've never slept with a man!" And they said: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you; will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

And it all seemed somehow possible, unlikely as it all sounded. There was a pause, and I realised I was being given a choice. Should I turn away, run and find Joseph and let my expected life unfold – or should I embark on this most unlikely adventure without knowing what I was letting myself in for?

¹ Luke 2: 25-35

² John 19: 34

³ Luke 1:36-38

Afterwards I realised I had loads of questions. I'd seen the disgrace of another girl who'd fallen pregnant outside of marriage. Who would take care of me? So many unknowns. But I found myself replying: "Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say."

And at that very moment I felt something happen. It's impossible to describe. The best I can do is like a rippling feeling in my abdomen. I remember my cheeks blushing. And a confidence I didn't know I possessed. That must have been the very moment of conception. When I looked up, Gabriel had gone. I had this mixture of emotions – humility (how come God had chosen me?), pride (God has chosen me!), a special sense of the closeness of God, Joy at the idea of becoming a mother, concern about all the uncertainties that lay ahead – and what was I going to say to Joseph?

I remember it all coming out in a kind of poem.

And the words came back to me that very special Sunday morning, once I'd got over that initial disbelief, once it became clear that somehow the ultimate miracle had happened: Jesus was alive again!

I'm bursting with God-news;

I'm dancing the song of my Saviour God

God took one good look at me, and look what happened –

I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!

What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.

His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.

It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.⁴

It's been amazing what's happened since! We've grown from a committed few to thousands. I've seen so many others experience the Holy Spirit coming on them. The words my son spoke are being repeated not just in Jerusalem or Galilee, but across the Roman Empire. I don't know how many years are ahead of me, but death doesn't hold any fears. Seeing Jesus again gave me total assurance.

He said he's coming back one final time. I wonder when that will be.

Rosemary Clarke

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Peel Cathedral, Isle of Man

⁴ Luke 1: 46-50, 55 (Message version)