

Where is God in all this?

19 July --- Mary

Trusting in Jesus: Learning to keep trusting in Jesus even when it all seems to be going wrong

Notes and discussion questions for home groups or personal study – Brian Bull

Readings

Key verses

Job 19:21-27a

“I know that my redeemer lives.”

Hebrews 11:23-27

“He (Moses) regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt...”

Luke 1:26-38

“May it be to me as you have said.”

Background

We all go through crisis points in our lives – sometimes very personal, sometimes (as now) crises which affect our larger society and nation. It very often seems at such times that our whole lives are falling apart, but if we have the ability to put our trust in God, and to look forward rather than backward, our whole perspective can change.

Think about some major crisis that have occurred in your past life experience.

- What did it feel like at the time?
- How was the situation resolved?
- What did you learn from the experience, as you look back on it?

Mary the mother of Jesus experienced three major crises in her life when, she could well have felt at the time, her whole life was plunged into chaos, and nothing would ever be the same again.

1. Jesus birth (Luke 1:26-38)

The visit of the angel Gabriel, and his announcement that she was to bear a son, put Mary in an unenviable position. She was already betrothed to Joseph. (The word is much stronger than the word “engaged” for us today, as it amounted a binding contract of marriage). Becoming pregnant at this point in her life would almost certainly result in her being divorced, rejected and shamed by her family, the target of abuse and hostility in a culture where everyone knew everybody else’s business, and a reputation for marital unfaithfulness would leave her destitute for the remainder of her life. Imagine Mary trying to explain her situation to family and friends with a totally unbelievable off-the-wall explanation: “Well, I had a visit from this angel...”

Mary knew that any such explanation would be received with derision, so she never told anyone. Joseph did know the truth, but not because Mary told him. God sent an angel to Joseph to intervene on Mary’s behalf. Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, also knew, but the truth was revealed to her by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41).

Apart from Mary. Joseph and Elizabeth, everyone else would assume that Joseph was Jesus’ biological father.

The fact that we have no report of Jesus’ birth from Mary’s perspective except in Luke, which was the last of the synoptic Gospels to be written, suggests in fact that Mary “kept all these things in her heart” and shared them with no-one until the very end of her life.

- Imagine what Mary’s situation would be like in our current social media culture. What kind of response might she receive from her social media “friends”?
- What sort of life would she be facing in her own culture (at least potentially) as a single divorced mother with an illegitimate child?
- How does this affect your understanding of Mary’s response to the angel in Luke 1:38.

Hebrews 11:26 says of Moses that, “*he regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.*”

- How does this description apply to Mary?
- What was the “reward” that kept Mary focused on the path that God had given her?”

2. The start of Jesus' ministry

God's plan for Jesus was that he should grow up in a regular human family and experience the joys and sorrows that we all have to face as we deal with the problems and hardship of this world. Although we have very little information in the Gospels about Jesus' childhood, the implications are that he lived a perfectly unremarkable life until it was time for him to start his earthly ministry by being baptized in the Jordan.

God's plan for Mary was to be a mother to her family, to give Jesus a safe and secure environment in which he could grow and mature until it was time to reveal himself to the world.

For many parents (especially mothers) having their children "leave the nest" can be a very unsettling and often disorientating experience.

- If you have already had that experience, or maybe are anticipating your children growing up and leaving home, how did it feel for you?... or how do you imagine it might change your life in the future?

For Mary, there was an additional factor at play, since Mary had been given a revelation from God as to the nature of Jesus' future ministry, and must have had some feelings of concern, even dread, at how Jesus' ministry would develop.

Simeon prophesied to Mary: *"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."* (Luke 2:34-35).

But we know that Mary, although she stayed in the background, was present at Jesus' first miracle in Cana of Galilee, and encouraged the guests at the wedding to put their trust in Jesus: *"His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'"* (John 2:5). We also know of at least one occasion when Mary, and Jesus' brothers, were present while Jesus was teaching (Luke 8:19-21), and we would be justified in thinking this was not the only time.

- What do these events tell us about Jesus' mother and her relationship with Jesus during his ministry?
- How does she cope with this sudden and drastic change from obedient son to God's Chosen Saviour?
- What do you think enabled Mary to handle the change of circumstances in such a positive way? (see Luke 1:45)

3. Crucifixion and beyond

John's account of the crucifixion places Mary, Jesus' mother, along with "his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene," standing near the cross, and watching Jesus' suffering and agony as he hung there with the sins of the world on his shoulders (John 19:25). Together with the other disciples, maybe more than most, she felt his pain and suffered grief and despair in her own heart.

But after his resurrection and ascension, she, along with Jesus' brothers, gathered in the upper room with the rest of the disciples to wait for the promise of the Spirit to be fulfilled (Acts 1:14).

So again, Mary's trust in God's promises has kept her from falling apart and carried her beyond the heart-wrenching sight of her own son being executed as a criminal on the cross of shame.

- What can we learn from Mary's example?
- What qualities of character does Mary reveal by her attitude and her relationship with Jesus?

Final thought

Although Mary had so much that she kept in her own heart, whenever we meet her in Scripture she is part of a growing family and worshipping community. The story of their visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 shows how embedded the family was in their local society, so much so that they set off back home thinking Jesus was with family and relatives and didn't even notice he was missing. Mary is with Jesus' brothers when they visit him (Luke 8:19-20), with the other women at the cross, and with the disciples in the upper room at Pentecost.

She is always the faithful servant, giving herself for others, but her solid faith and belief in God's unfailing goodness must have had a calming and stabilising effect on those around her during difficult and stormy circumstances.

- What about us? Do we, personally and as a church community, offer hope, stability, a place of calm in the midst of the storm?

Let's pray for our community, and for all those struggling to make sense of these worrying and uncertain times.