

# Mary: Woman of Faith

David Breen continues his series on people of the Gospel.

In the gospel we first meet Mary at the Annunciation and are amazed at her faith and positive response to the angel Gabriel's message that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. Given her unmarried state and the obvious difficulties her pregnancy could create for her with her family, community and Joseph, her unhesitating yes and trust in God is all the more remarkable. The annunciation to Mary is juxtaposed to the similar and related annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist to the elderly priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, where Zechariah is unable to believe a lesser but connected risk-free promise without a confirming sign (Lk 1:20). Surprisingly faith was found in the young, marginalised girl from obscurity rather than in the elderly priest, where it would have been expected. What is the secret of Mary's faith?

The nativity story provides a clue. All who heard the shepherds' story were amazed (Lk 2:18), but amazement doesn't always lead to faith. The people were amazed, but only the shepherds worshipped (Lk 2:20). All were amazed when Jesus fed 5,000 with a few loaves and fishes and wanted to make him king but walked away when he claimed to be the bread of life (Jn 6:15, 66). Amazement at the raising of Lazarus didn't prevent

the Jewish leaders from plotting the deaths of both Jesus and Lazarus (Jn 11:47–57; 12:10).

In contrast to the amazement of the people Mary 'kept all these things, pondering them in her heart' (Lk 2:19). Twelve years later after finding the boy Jesus in the Temple, where he was listening to the teachers and asking them questions, Mary is again said to have 'kept all these things in her heart' (Lk 2:51). The word translated as 'kept' in verse 19 means to protect or preserve. Herod protected John the Baptist in prison (Mk 6:20). New wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Mt 9:17). In verse 51 a different word from the same root is used giving it the meaning treasured. Together they indicate that Mary's attitude to God's word that had come to her in a variety of ways and the events in her life was to treasure and protect them against loss, ensuring that the doubts and assaults that must surely have attacked her did not erode them. She achieved that by pondering the events in her heart. Pondering has the basic meaning of throwing together with the purpose of arriving at the right meaning. This is what Mary did with all that was happening to her.

We see something similar in the Annunciation. Mary was perplexed by the angel Gabriel's greeting that



Sixteenth-century painting of the Annunciation by Nicolas Falco, Valencia, Spain

addressed her in exalted and favourable terms and pondered it – in contrast to Zechariah. The word Luke uses for pondering here has a different nuance and indicates that Mary thoroughly reasoned the manner of Gabriel's greeting, suggesting that she was fully aware that it was paradigmatic of divine commissioning. The following episode, the visitation to Elizabeth, which depicts her as the new Ark of the Covenant through allusions to 2 Samuel 6:12–15, confirms that Mary was thoroughly immersed in Israel's story. Her canticle, the Magnificat, celebrates the 'irruption of salvation in history' (Cantalamesa), as the fulfilment of the covenant made to Abraham (Lk 2:55). It draws on a variety of Old Testament hymns and the great reversal theme of God raising

up the poor and humbling the rich, of which the Exodus is the supreme example. This familiarity with God's ways and Israel's story, which only comes from keeping and pondering his word, facilitated Mary's acceptance without protest of the role of mother to the Messiah. In this Mary is the model disciple.

Christian faith is in decline in our world and often the faith of its adherents seems to reflect more the secular culture of their contexts than a genuine Christian worldview and values. Mary's attitude of keeping and pondering God's word is the way to developing a truly Christian mind and points the way to renewal. According to Jesus membership of his family belongs to those 'who hear the word of God and do it' (Lk 8:21).