

SERMON TRANSCRIPT



Ormskirk Christian Fellowship
Sunday 16 December 2012

Blessed Is The Child (Luke 1:26-56)

Eleven years ago, on the 3rd of December 2001, a fiercely guarded secret and long awaited mystery that had gripped the world for months, was finally revealed. The internet had been buzzing about it. Nicknamed "Ginger" or simply "IT" the most recent invention by American entrepreneur Dean Kamen, a college dropout, was (he claimed) going to revolutionise the world of transportation. Before its grand unveiling, Steve Jobs, co-founder, chairman and CEO of the massive Apple Corporation, even suggested that the launch of this new product could be as significant as the personal computer (that's a PC to those of you who prefer the technical jargon).

Dean Kamen had already earned himself a well-deserved reputation as an inventor. He'd created the first ever insulin pump, and a portable kidney dialysis machine. In the months leading up to this latest project being unveiled, rumours had abounded that it was going to be some kind of hovercraft, helicopter backpack, or a teleportation pod like the Jetson's used. Experts speculated that it was going to be hydrogen powered or driven by the high-tech Stirling engine. Thousands of people waited and wondered what it would be, what it would do, and when it would be ready.

The United States Postal Service, the National Parks Service, and Amazon.com had all been trying out various prototypes, shrouded in secrecy. But when it was actually unveiled for the very first time on the ABC News programme Good Morning America, it soon became obvious that "IT" was little more than a glorified scooter with gyroscopes. Boasting an average speed of 8 mph and a top speed of 12 mph, the **Segway Human Transporter** was going to cost about \$3,000 to buy in the shops, but only had a range of 15 miles even when fully charged.

Kamen had spent more than \$90 million to develop it, but when Diane Sawyer, the ABC News presenter took her first glimpse, "That's it?" was all she found herself able to say. Just at the point when media coverage mattered the most, the Segway Human Transporter failed to live up to all the hype. Newspapers likened it to a pogo stick on wheels. Others called it a mini-chariot. Somebody else described it as a skateboard on steroids. It was interesting to look at, maybe even 'cute' ... but it was hardly going to change the world ... not even the transportation industry.

Now I realise that for some of you, what I've just shared probably seems a very strange way to begin a three part series this morning, looking at the Christmas story ... but you know, just before the birth of Jesus, there was a similar sense of expectation and hope (although admittedly not for a Segway). People were waiting and wondering. They hoped that something amazing was about to happen ... they were expecting something wonderful to be unveiled. The Scriptures promised the coming of a Messiah, and rumours abounded that he would be arriving any time now. He was going to turn everything around, and deliver Israel from her enemies. This Messiah would usher in the kingdom of God and revolutionise everything; change the whole world, as they knew it.

But if those same people, so full of expectation, had visited the dingy backyard stable in the town of Bethlehem on that dark, starry night ... and all they'd seen was a newborn baby, they too might perhaps have said, "That's it? All that hype just for this?" It was interesting to look at, maybe even 'cute' ... but it was hardly going to change the world ... was it?

Well, turn back the clock nine months, and you soon start to see something else happening here. It's what we've just been reading in Luke chapter 1. Mary doesn't fully understand the difference that the child she's carrying is going to make, but she knows there's something special taking place, because an angel brings her a message. The Bible says:

²⁶ **In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."**

²⁹ **Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.**

³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God.
³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Now I don’t want us to underestimate the significance of this, so let’s just pause and recap for a second ... here, about 13 / 14 or so years into Mary’s young, relatively normal and uncomplicated life; one day, suddenly and rather unexpectedly, comes someone with wings ... and in spite of her fear and being totally overwhelmed by the presence of this powerful spiritual being, Mary says:

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant, may your word to me be fulfilled.”

Wow. I find that astonishing! I mean, for starters ... who’s going to believe a story like that?

As you may already know, being betrothed in that day and culture was as legally binding as being married. The only way to break off a betrothal was to get a divorce. Despite the fact that Mary and Joseph weren’t even married yet, if either was unfaithful to the other, it would be considered adultery, and that was punishable by being stoned to death. Pretty serious stuff!

The bible makes it clear what Joseph thought ... it says he planned to do the honourable thing and quietly divorce her. He knew it wasn’t his child. He must have cared greatly for Mary though, because he wants to be kind about it – he certainly didn’t have to be. Ultimately, Joseph has his own encounter with an angel and in time, we see that he comes to accept Mary’s version of events. We all know what happens next ... they go to Bethlehem and have the baby after all, but just imagine the kind of turmoil that they went through along the way.

What about Mary’s parents? Nobody thinks about the parents do they? Can you imagine how that conversation must have gone? “Mum, Dad, I’ve got something I need to tell you. I’m pregnant. No it’s not Joseph’s. No, he hasn’t treated me wrong. No, it’s not his fault; please don’t blame him. Mum, Dad, don’t be angry. Yes, I know these things can’t just happen. That’s what I said to the angel. But he told me there was no need to be worried and that everything was going to be okay. Do I know the daddy? Erm, well ... sort of ... it’s God.”

Many of you here today are parents, and a lot of you have daughters. Would you believe a story like that? I’d better not ask for a show of hands! And we think that things get convoluted and complicated, and busy and stressful in our lives! Imagine this suddenly being dropped on you in the middle of the afternoon, while you’re peeling the onions for tea ...

Well Mary had been thinking about all these things, and when she goes to visit cousin Elizabeth, her joy just spills over into song. I want us to look at the song of Mary this morning, because there are some important truths for us to understand here ... gold nuggets for us to mine. Mary makes three important statements:

1. My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour
2. He has performed mighty deeds
3. He has helped his servant Israel

The first statement: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour

The keyword here is forgiveness. Mary’s first response to the good news that God is bringing forgiveness to the world is to worship. Her song is often called The Magnificat, which comes from the opening word in the Latin translation, and it’s full of quotes from the Old Testament. Mary was probably about thirteen years old here, and it would have been normal in that day and in that culture for betrothals to take place around that kind of age. The wedding would usually take place about a year later.

What we're seeing here is that Mary has an amazing maturity and spiritual depth for a teenage girl, and I think this helps us to understand what kind of person Mary was. She loved the Lord because he had done great things for her. She understood that she didn't deserve this special privilege of being a mother to the Messiah, and says in verse 48, **"He (God) has been mindful of the humble state of his servant"**. She was a special person, faithful in her obedience and love for God, but she also needed a Saviour, just like the rest of us.

I'm sure many of you will have heard the Roman Catholic church talk about the "immaculate conception" but they're not referring to the birth of Christ, they're talking about the birth of Mary. They believe that she was born without original sin. They believe that she lived a sinless life. Whilst I'm sure we can respect our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, that's not what the bible says. The bible is clear that Mary needed a saviour just as much as the rest of us. She doesn't say, "My spirit rejoices in God, **the** Saviour" she says, "My spirit rejoices in God, **my** Saviour." Sinless people don't need a saviour, but Mary isn't sinless. She knows that ... but even despite her being just like the rest of us, God not only becomes her saviour, he also awards her the unparalleled privilege of being the one to bring his Son into the world. It's no wonder that Mary finds herself spilling over into song!

One or two of you may have heard of Marghanita Laski. She was a secular humanist, which means that she denied the need for, as well as the existence of, God. Shortly before her death in 1988, she gave a very candid television interview. In a moving moment of truth, witnessed by millions, she said, "The thing that I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness ... I have nobody to forgive me."

How privileged are we, that we have someone to forgive us - that our hearts can be washed clean? We have forgiveness because we have a God who came to the world to save us. I read a quote as I was preparing this message, that "Mary was the first person in the world to carry the Gospel." How true that was. What an enormous privilege. Mary knew and understood exactly what that meant, and she worshiped God because of it. She goes on to say in verse 48, **"From now on all generations will call me blessed"**. She, who needed a saviour, gave birth to the Saviour. How amazing is that? This alone gave her more than enough reason to worship.

The second statement: He has performed mighty deeds

I think the keyword here is victory. The mighty deeds God was doing would overcome the world and turn everything the right way up again. Mary sings about God scattering the proud, bringing down rulers from their thrones and lifting up the humble. She sings about God filling the hungry but sending the rich away with empty stomachs ... God turning the tables on the world.

I'm not sure whether Mike deliberately planned it this way, but a few weeks ago we were looking at the beatitudes, and we saw Jesus telling people, **"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."** (Luke 6:20-21) Jesus was going to reverse the fortunes of the proud and humble, the rich and poor, the strong and weak. He was the Saviour who would right the wrongs of the world and give the downtrodden reason to rejoice. Jesus was coming for everyone - regardless of their status in the world.

The humble are valued by God, but the arrogant can humble themselves and become right with God too. The oppressed find mercy and help. Oppressors can stop their oppression, and find grace. Those who are weak can be strong in God. The strong can admit their weakness, and find true strength. But we have to come to God, all of us, on his terms rather than ours. We humble ourselves, we admit our weakness and we turn from our sin. We turn to God for his strength, his wealth, and his wholeness. That's what Mary is singing about here.

Dallas Willard tells the story of a military fighter pilot performing high-speed manoeuvres. He thrusts on the controls to make a steep upward climb, only to find himself crashing into the ground. Somehow, in all the loops and spins, turns and tricks that he'd been doing, the pilot became unaware that he was flying upside down. That's a modern day parable but it describes the world we live in today - rushing about at breakneck speed; not even realising that we're the

wrong way round. People keep crashing but they don't understand why, and they start to wonder whether there's even such a thing as being the right way up. The world is in a mess.

Don't all roads lead to the same place? As long as you believe in God and practice some form of religion, don't we all get to heaven eventually? Can't we just love God but live how we like? Well, no, says the bible. You can't live outside God's will but still expect God's blessing. You'll be flying the wrong way up, and sooner or later, you're going to crash. Jesus said, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."** (John 14:6) He's the one who'll turn you the right way up and help you overcome this world, but only if you're willing to let him take the controls.

The third statement: He has helped his servant Israel

Mary says that God has: **"helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."** (Luke 1:54-55) She's referring to God's covenant. That's the keyword here: covenant - one of the most important concepts in Scripture. Covenant is an important word and it means that God keeps his promises. He doesn't forget. He doesn't get sidetracked. Even when it seems as though nothing is happening, God is still at work behind the scenes. Those who were expecting the Messiah, and growing weary with waiting, were blessed when they saw the promise of God come true.

Being in covenant with God means that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. God has bound himself to us in loving faithfulness. Not only are we bound to God, but he is also bound to us. He has made promises and committed himself to us with cords of love. **"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."** (Jeremiah 31:33) God has committed himself to us. He's on our side. He is for us, not against us. Anyone who threatens us must ultimately deal with him. His love commits him to us, in ways we cannot even comprehend. The Bible says, **"The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them."** (Psalm 25:14)

Mary had no way of fully understanding what God was asking her to do, nor did she really understand what would happen to her little boy as he became a man and ultimately accepted His calling as the Messiah. She didn't know there would be shepherds coming to welcome her baby, nor did she know that wise men from 1,000 miles away would be bringing expensive gifts. She could never have imagined a deranged king who'd start killing innocent babies just because of her child, or that they'd have to leave and flee to Egypt. She didn't foresee a cross either, but Mary was willing to put her faith in God's plans. Her attitude was one of praise and trust ... "God, I may not understand it, I may not particularly enjoy it, and if I was in charge I may well have done things differently ... but I trust that you know what you're doing, and I want to glorify you."

Friends, in our journey of faith, Mary's simple response stands as a marker, a spiritual signpost for us too. We get so busy with Christmas and just about everything else in our lives, making everything far more hectic and complicated than it was ever supposed to be. We're so caught up in our planning and working and worrying, that we miss the simplicity of Mary's response, and we don't notice her attitude of total trust and reliance on God, that somehow leaps off the page.

Let's make sure we catch hold of it this morning. Let's try to see what Mary saw, what allowed her to make the response that she did, what led her to step out in faith and take the risks that she took. Let's look beyond all the fancy packaging and the parties - to a Holy, Almighty and Loving God who cares so deeply and passionately about each of us, that he came to save us.

Because of what God has already done, let's worship him for his forgiveness, let's worship him for his victory over the world, and let's worship him for the covenant he has made with us. The Bible says, **"For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ."** (2 Corinthians 1:20) Our response needs to be the same as Mary's: "Lord, here is my life. I hand it to you. I will do whatever you ask. I will go wherever you lead. Make me your servant. Amen."