



1 October 2016

## Call and Response (Luke 1:26–38)

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We are now mid-way in our series of 'Call and Response'. Tonight I will draw some threads together from what has been said already, and will do so through considering Mary's call and response that was in our reading for tonight.

In my earlier reflection, three weeks ago, I spoke of receiving a call that I choked on because I could not see how it would be possible in my present circumstances, or in my future. Mary's call was also improbable and seemingly impossible. Her response came only after much pondering in her heart, realising she would not know ahead of time what it might involve or mean for her life.

Nikolai's reflection two weeks ago had as its theme an invitation to follow Jesus into abundance of life, beyond the meanness and resentment that we often carry as a result of living our lives in this imperfect world. Mary's positive response to become the Mother of God meant that she was full of the abundant life of God, beyond the fear she initially felt, and I will reflect tonight on our being God-bearers, like Mary.

Last week Susie reflected on John 15:1–11, the vine and the branches, particularly on v.4: 'Abide in me as I abide in you'. She has come to see it as an invitation, without judgement, to live from God, the source of life. I will reflect further tonight on these themes as we consider God abiding in Mary and her giving birth to the Christ child for the sake of the world.

Let's begin with Mary's call and response. In the scriptural reading we learn very little about what Mary went through in making her 'yes' to God. We have no back story, no detail of what she pondered in her heart. In much of the church's tradition, Mary is portrayed as meek and humble, perhaps rightly so, but without any fight or spirit in her response to God. When feminist theology arose, so did the suspicion that the church had kept Mary quiet so that women, encouraged to emulate her example, were also kept quiet, meek and mild. Mary was portrayed as a 'yes' woman, without having much by way of her own voice or agency.

In response to that, I tried to imagine what it must have been like for Mary to receive this call and to ponder its implications. I wanted to give her some voice and agency, and to flesh out her response when Gabriel visited her. I wrote a dialogue some years back called 'Gabriel's Visit', which Karina will help me with tonight. Karina is Mary and I am Gabriel.

## Gabriel's Visit<sup>1</sup>

[After Gabriel's announcement that Mary has found favour with the Lord and will bear the Son of God, I imagine she would have had a spirited response.]

**Mary:** I'm sorry, but I think you have the wrong Mary. I mean, we are talking about the Lord, the King, here. If he were to be born into humanity he would want a queen or princess as a mother. At least someone important and influential. I'm just a young girl from a small town. I'm not Mother-of-God material. I'm the wrong person.

**Gabriel:** (Stands his ground and holds her in his gaze.)

**Mary:** Well, maybe not royalty, necessarily, but at least the Lord would have chosen someone *well off*. You can't have the Lord running around in rags and receiving a sub-standard education. And surely he would want the best doctors in the empire for his birth. It's a risky business taking on human flesh. I just can't provide these things. I can't afford what is required here.

**Gabriel:** He wants you, Mary.

**Mary:** Well, even if the Lord wanted to forego privilege and class, and is willing to be born into poverty, surely he would have at least chosen an experienced mother for himself! I mean, he could look down from Heaven and find a woman who's got several children already, and he could see the proof of her mothering in her children – that her kids are happy and well-adjusted, strong and good-looking, kind and generous. And he could say: 'This is the mother for me!' But I don't have any experience here. I don't even know how to hold a baby, and you're telling me that my first baby will be the Lord. What if I drop him?!

**Gabriel:** You'll be OK, Mary. You'll be fine.

**Mary:** All right, so the Lord is willing to be born into a simple, poor family. Maybe He's making some sort of statement here. Fine. And he is willing to risk an inexperienced mother. I still would have thought, at the very least, that the Lord would have chosen someone who was *married*. What is Joseph going to say?

He'll say, 'Why Mary, you're looking big'.  
And I'll say, 'I am'.  
Then he'll say, 'Why Mary, you're pregnant'.  
And I'll say, 'I might be'.  
'Who with, Mary?' he'll ask.  
And what am I going to say – 'the Lord'?

**Gabriel:** Fear not, Mary, for I will send a messenger to Joseph to explain everything to him.

**Mary:** You've got everything covered, haven't you?  
(Mary ponders these things in her heart, then says:)  
You know, I am feeling the pressure here a bit. I mean, the whole of human history is going to expect me to take this lying down.

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<sup>1</sup> I originally wrote 'Gabriel's Visit' as a dialogue to perform as a skit at a feminist theology conference in Sydney and later published it as a monologue in *St Mark's Review*, No. 160, Summer 1995, pp. 18-20. The version tonight has reverted to a dialogue.

**Gabriel:** (After a pause) What do you say, Mary?

**Mary:** (Considers her situation) But I feel so inadequate. I am appalled yet humbled that you have asked me. I am so afraid.

**Gabriel:** (Holds her in his gaze) Do not be afraid. The Lord is with you.

**Mary:** (After a hesitation) Here am I. Let it be to me according to your word.

This has been an imaginative exercise. I do not presume to know just what Mary went through. But behind this exercise is the assumption that I think it is fine to have a spirited response to the call of God on our lives, especially if it is a big ask, like Mary's. The qualification I have is that the response be governed by openness and honesty. We must be honest for our own integrity, to be true to who we are. But we must also be open, because who we are may change over time and in response to God's call. And we must be open if we are to accept Jesus' invitation to live from life in abundance, rather than from our fears and resentments, which make us small-minded and mean-hearted. This was Nikolai's point in his reflection. And we must be open if we are to be drawn into something bigger than ourselves, bigger than what we can see or perceive, into a future that seems improbable or impossible from where we stand now.

While Mary's calling is unique, her experience has been fruitful for considering the spiritual life more generally. Her bearing the Christ-child within becomes a metaphor for our bearing Christ within us. Her being the Mother of God is fruitful for considering how we bear God within us.

John Main, the Benedictine monk who revived the practice of meditation for the present church, reflected on Mary as an ideal for our experience of God. He taught that,

...every Christian is called to bring Jesus to birth within him or her; that, as Jesus was conceived and grew in bodily reality within Mary, so no less really He is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and grows to full stature with the power of love within every responsive human heart.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to say that the condition of Mary's reception of Jesus was her openness and simplicity, purity of heart, and that the same condition applies to us. This is what the practice of meditation cultivates – openness, simplicity, receptivity.

Last week when Susie considered the text, 'abide in me as I abide in you', I wondered what that meant for Mary's experience of Jesus abiding in her. I could see that we were in danger of mixed metaphors at this point. When we speak of abiding in God, 'in whom we live, and move and have our being', it feels like *we* are in *God's* womb. So how might we understand this mutual 'abiding'?

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Harris (ed), *Daily Readings with John Main: Silence and Stillness in Every Season*, Continuum, New York, 1998, p. 252.

Perhaps the English theologian, Sarah Coakley, can help us here.<sup>3</sup> Coakley argues that our *thinking* about God needs to be accompanied by ascetic practices (contemplative prayer, meditation), if we are to grow more and more into the likeness of God, and allow God to live in us. These practices transform us over a life-time, and in this process she discerns three levels of the spiritual life. The first is where we imitate Christ, and other spiritual leaders, as external guides to our behaviour and desires. The second is where we commit ourselves to intentional communities, perhaps with a rule or 'marks'. We are formed in these communal practices and keep each other honest and on task. The third level includes the first two but is marked not only by external examples and rules, but also by the internal experience of God living in us. Paul spoke of this when he said, 'and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). He also spoke of the Holy Spirit praying in and through us in 'sighs too deep for words' (Romans 8:26). In all this, Coakley sees the triune God at work. She speaks of the *one* experience of God, whereby God simultaneously does the praying in us, receives that prayer, and in that exchange, with our consent, invites us into the life of Christ.<sup>4</sup> So there are levels at which we are more consciously aware of God living in us. But we are also drawn all the way into the dynamic of God's triune life as we make ourselves more and more receptive to God. All the metaphors of God abiding in our hearts or wombs, or we in God's, aim at expressing something of this dynamic.

Through Mary's call and response we are offered an invitation to be receptive to God living in us, so that this may issue forth in our transformed behaviours and desires for the sake of the world. I have also suggested we be spirited in our response to God's call, be open and honest, and be not afraid, for the Lord is with you.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism, Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God*, Bloomsbury, London, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, p. 90.