



# An Announcement about Jesus

Luke 1:26-38

Have you ever had the feeling that the place where you live is a bit off the map, even somewhere looked down on by others? Not long after arriving in Selsdon, someone told me the story of how David Bowie had little positive to say about his experience of living in our part of the world: “It was my nemesis, I hated Croydon with a real vengeance. It represented everything I didn't want in my life, everything I wanted to get away from. I think it's the most derogatory thing I can say about somebody or something: 'It's so Croydon!'”.

Many of us will have read this week's passage on countless previous occasions. And yet, we might still fail to grasp just how lowly and insignificant its setting is. According to New Testament scholar Paula Gooder, 'At this time Nazareth was an obscure agricultural village and, apart from the New Testament, not mentioned in literature at all until about the third century AD. Nor was it on any trade route and, with a population of about 450, was a very small village.'<sup>1</sup> And yet it's to a young girl in this tiny backwater that the angel Gabriel arrives with news which will change her world, and our world too.

Another disconcerting feature of this story is the likely age of Mary. In v27, Luke describes her as 'a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph.' The Jewish custom of this time was that girls married around the age of 12 and boys around the age of 14. The period of betrothal (not an engagement, but more like a sort of first stage of marriage) which came before a wedding could last for up to a year, meaning Mary could have been as young as 11 when visited by Gabriel. Paula Gooder helpfully comments on this detail of the story: 'Here is a young girl who, as far as Luke's account records, is asked by God to face disgrace in order to bring salvation into the world. She is charged with facing that disgrace – and potential danger to life and limb – alone, and she does it with courage and dignity.'<sup>2</sup>

In light of how ominous this assignment may seem to us, Gabriel tells Mary that it has come to her because she has 'found favour with God' (v30). The word translated as 'favour' is *charis*, often translated elsewhere as 'grace' and a term which conveys the idea of benefitting from God's goodness and generosity. We can only imagine how Mary must have felt, not only at this news of her pregnancy but also the remarkable description of the son, to be called Jesus, who she would bear: '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, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end' (Luke 1:32-33).

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<sup>1</sup> Paula Gooder, *Journey to the Manger*, 2015, 52

<sup>2</sup> Paula Gooder, *Journey to the Manger*, 2015, 56

In verse 34, Mary asks how this will be. A similar question posed by Zechariah caused Gabriel to reprimand him for his lack of faith. Mary, however, faces no such criticism. Perhaps she asked the same question, but with a tone of voice that suggested wonder more than doubt. Gabriel goes on to explain that her pregnancy will come about through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.

Our reading finishes at verse 38, with what could be described as 'the biggest yes to God' in Scripture. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Among the many fascinating aspects of this story, these final words stand out, a remarkable statement of submission to the purposes of God.

1. What might the apparently insignificant location of this story teach us about the places in which God chooses to work? How does it challenge any preconceptions we might have about where a great work of God can occur?
2. How does it make you feel to learn how young Mary was at the time of these events, and to reflect on the position God put her in?
3. Writing on this story Paula Gooder notes that, 'Being assured of God's favour feels a little like the two-edged wish of the Chinese proverb, 'May you live in interesting times'. Being favoured by God means that your life is about to be turned on its head.'<sup>3</sup> Can you think of a time when how God used you to turned out to be disruptive? What did you learn about him through this process?
4. How do you feel as you reflect on the different responses of Zechariah and Mary to the news they receive in Luke 1? In what ways are you challenged or inspired by them?
5. Parenting is a privilege and joy, but often a source of anxiety and heartache. How might Gabriel's words to Mary have helped her as she saw the man Jesus became and what happened to him at the end of his time on earth?

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<sup>3</sup> Paula Gooder, *Journey to the Manger*, 2015, 58