

**Farewell Sermon preached by Christopher, Bishop of Coventry,
at a Service of Thanksgiving and Farewell during All Saints' Tide
in Coventry Cathedral on 4th November 2023**

Readings: Exodus 3.1-15 and Luke 1.26-38

Today's readings . . .

Our readings bring together two saints of God: a young man and a young woman. Moses, the ancient saint of old and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

There is much for us to learn from Moses and Mary about perennial questions of life. I'd like to focus on three.

First: when – how – do we discover who we truly are and how we can live life fully?

We learn from Moses and Mary that we discover who we truly are and how we can live life fully when we encounter the reality of God and when we make ourselves available to God for his good purposes for the world.

The bush was burning but not consumed. 'I must turn and look at this great sight', says Moses.

And God spoke, calling him by name – 'Moses, Moses!' – saying, 'I am the God of your father Abraham'.

I am here and I am for you'.

And Moses could do none other than say, 'Here I am for you'.

Speaking God's word the angel called Mary by name, promised that God's favour was upon her.

'Do not be afraid, Mary, the Lord is with you'.

And Mary responded to the magnificent mystery of God: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord'.

Moses and Mary found themselves in God.

My second question: who is this God who encounters us and what are God's good purposes for the world?

The story of Moses tells us that God is the God of compassion who comes to us to deliver us: 'I have seen the suffering of my people', says the Lord, 'I have come down to deliver them'.

The story of Mary tells us that God's favour, God's goodness, God's call comes to each of us whoever we are – even in 1st century Palestine to a young, poor, uneducated woman in an occupied country, soon to be a refugee.

Mary takes us to central conviction of Christian Faith that God comes to us in person, in the gift of his Son Jesus to the womb of Mary to deliver the world from its sin and suffering.

'Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Is heaven's perfect Lamb:
That sleeping child you're holding is the great, I am'.

Who shall I say sent me, said Moses to God just after the story we have heard today?
'Tell them I am who I am!', replies the Lord.

The God of Moses shrouded in mystery and beyond definition comes to Mary, and dwells within her born into the world through her, God – the great 'I am' – lives among her people, down her street ready to come and dwell within us and among us, in our city and country, in our homes and hearts.

So filled with the fulness of God was Mary, that a little while later she sang of a new world where the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are filled with good things. Her magnificent manifesto of a changed world that her son would make possible.

So thirdly, what does this God, who comes to us, who is *for us* want from us, and what will this God of compassion and goodness do with us?

Well, we are back at the beginning. 'Here am I', says Moses.
'Here am I', says Mary.

Like all the saints of yesterday and today, they made themselves available to God and to God's good purposes for the world.

And so God sent Moses to liberate a suffering people.
And so God sent Mary to bear the life of God into her troubled world.

As God sent them, he supplied them.
God supplied Moses – the Moses who ran away from danger – with courage to face the Pharaoh and set God's people free.
God supplied Mary – Mary who was full of fear when God came near – with joy and dignity, with the strength of God's Spirit, with the gift of his Son.

Some of the children of our diocesan family of schools will sing in a moment a wonderful song.

'I wanna be a World Changer, I wanna give hope, I wanna speak life
I'm gonna be a World Changer'
I'm gonna be brave. I'm gonna shine bright – just watch me now!

It's inside of you, it's inside of me
and we're gonna let the whole world see we are World Changers.

Moses and Mary became World Changers.

Conclusion and thanksgiving

Dear Friends, for these last fifteen years I have had the honour to serve with the clergy and people of the Church of England in this place, with brothers and sisters of other Churches, with leaders of other Faith Communities, with councillors and politicians, administrators of law and justice, carers from hospitals and hospices, protectors in the armed forces, educators, industrialists, artists and musicians, activists and faithful volunteers in all manner of charities, and others too numerable to number from – all committed to making our community and our world better place.

I am so thankful for you, and I am humbled by the presence of many of you today.

And I am so grateful for Coventry, this city with our iconic Cathedral, that stubbornly goes on saying to the world, peace is better than war, reconciliation is better than enmity.

Even while a terrible war rages, tearing two peoples apart, endangering the peace of the whole world, Coventry goes on believing the word of the angel to Mary – 'For nothing will be impossible for God'.
And Coventry goes on inviting the people of the world to stand in humility before God and simply say, 'Father, forgive'.

Moses and Mary stood in humility before God – 'How can this be?', said Mary – and they were transformed by the reality of

God who is *for us* and who *comes to us* in Jesus Christ to save from our wrongdoing and deliver us from harm.

So let us say with Moses and Mary, 'Here am I, ready to do your will'.

Let us open our hearts to receive the reality of God in Jesus.

And let us hear the children sing: 'I wanna give hope, I wanna speak life, I'm gonna be a World Changer – just watch me now.'