

## Sunday 20 December (Advent 4), a Reflection

This has been a year in which the kindness and compassion of ordinary people has not gone unnoticed. The best example is, probably Captain Tom, now, of course, Captain Sir Tom Moore, whose garden circuits helped raise an almost unimaginable £32 million for NHS charities in two glorious weeks around his hundredth birthday in April. He thought he might just raise a thousand.

A few months later, the Independent newspaper listed other ordinary heroes. My favourites include Lorraine Tabone who, for the last five years, has coordinated a team of volunteers from her east London flat to help rough sleepers find safe accommodation and support.

Another is Syrian NHS cleaner Hassan Akkad who works on a Covid-19 ward at Whipps Cross Hospital in Leytonstone, a former filmmaker and teacher before taking up his current job. He created videos that helped bring about changes in government policy on the treatment of foreign care work staff.

And then there's Jason Baird and Andrew Baldock, the Stockport Spidermen, who take it in turns to go on a daily run dressed as the superhero to cheer up neighbours. On the way they've have raised more than £40,000 for NHS charities.

There's hardly any limit to what apparently 'little people', but people with big hearts can do. Love goes a very long way.

This hugely important message is close to St Luke's heart too as he writes his Gospel. In the story of how God chose Mary to be the mother of his Son, Luke is at pains to show how God favours and loves ordinary people and then urges them to do the most extraordinary things. It's an inspirational story of transformation, or as St Luke himself puts it, of how 'nothing will be impossible with God.'

Mary seems to be an ordinary girl from a very ordinary place. Nazareth is so insignificant that it merits no mention in history outside the Gospel story. Luke graces it with the title of a town, but that was probably pushing it a bit – in fact, quite a lot. And the region in which it was set was a cultural and religious backwater.

Mary herself is descended, in part, from a priestly family. We know this because Luke tells us about her cousin Elizabeth, who is described as being so by him, but Aaron (Moses' big brother), Elizabeth's distant ancestor, had a countless number of descendants. It doesn't mean a great deal at all. We know nothing else about Mary's background, or even her age, though it was more than likely she was a (very young) teenager. Being so young, it's little wonder that when she's confronted by an angel she's scared stiff. The translation in the NSRV the (otherwise very reliable) version of

the Bible we use most weeks that she was 'perplexed' doesn't capture the force of the original at all, so I changed it.

But there's another intriguing layer to Luke's storytelling which is also somewhat lost in translation – the names of the main characters reveal quite a different side to them. The name 'Jesus' for example, or Jeshua/Joshua, means 'God saves'. It's a symbolic, special name. That's why Gabriel is so keen that Mary hears his message – so that we do too.

But our Mary isn't really Mary either but actually, according to Luke's Greek text, Mariam or Miriam. Does Luke want us to hear an echo of another great Miriam? This Miriam is the sister of Moses who, just like our Mary, responds to God's intervention in history with an unforgettable song – a song that rejoices in God's saving power, sung it in triumph when the Israelites reached safety across the miraculously parted waters of the Red Sea. We still read it each year on Easter Eve. Is Luke telling us too that this new Mariam is also associated with a new kind of freedom from oppression – a new kind of salvation through love? It's very possible.

In many ways these two aspects of the story of Mary are just as significant as the tradition about the miraculous nature of how Jesus was conceived – a tradition that's there to remind us that Jesus is of God as much as he is human.

Mariam, Mary the ordinary girl, still stands for all of us who don't think we're anyone terribly special and that God will surely find better, stronger, more articulate, more gifted people to change our world; but Luke will keep coming back to his insistent theme that ordinary people do matter to God very much indeed. Luke writes his Gospel to reassure the poor, in whatever sense we recognise we're poor, that God has a special care for us and can achieve great things through us.

And God's power is never limited. God chooses, almost invariably, to work through you and me, through Captain Tom, Lorraine Tabone, Hassan Akkad and the two wonderful Stockport Spidermen. The great message of Christmas is that God favours us, loves us and chooses us. Mary was just the beginning. She's just the first, though perhaps most vivid example of how God usually works and of how God values and affirms every single one of us.

We may be relieved that we'll not be asked to do quite what she had to do, but with God, we must always remember, nothing will be impossible. Great new things are always possible. If you're looking for a message of hope in these dark days of Advent, in our sometimes broken and worryingly unstable and unpredictable world, you don't need to look any further than to Mary.