

Sermon: Mary – blessed, believing, broken

Luke 1:39–56

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the main person in the Christmas drama. She is an amazing person who deserves our careful attention and love; she is a great example for all of us, and she can help us to serve our Lord God better.

We look today at the Virgin Mary based on three concepts. She is the **blessed** Mary, the **believing** Mary, and the **broken** Mary. I believe these words, *blessed, believing and broken*, also summarize the life of the average Christian.

First, we focus on *Blessed* Mary

Mary was probably a young teenager, when the Lord God through his angel Gabriel spoke to her. What a shocking event and what a difficult message for that tender girl.

She was engaged to be married; she must have had her dreams of marriage to her fiancée, Joseph. Dreams of togetherness, love, and then having children as well.

The message of the angel must have roughed up all Mary's dreams of happiness with Joseph. So how is it possible that just days, maybe weeks later, when visiting her aunt Elisabeth, Mary is able to praise God for what He is doing in her life. Mary is so convinced that her life is made wonderful by God, that she exclaimed in her worshipful prayer: 'From now on all generations will call me blessed...'

She realized that what was happening to her, involved all generations after her, and they would all know about her, Mary, from the village of Nazareth, from the tribe of Judah... who was pregnant of the divine child, Jesus. And indeed, even today, 2011 years later, we still speak of her.

We all thank God for having send Jesus into the world, God's grace for us, and we are amazed of God's special grace for Mary.

She exclaimed with joy that all generations would call her blessed, just moments after her Elizabeth had also told her: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!'

The Greek word for 'blessed' is *makarios*. This word was used by Greek philosophers like Aristotle to describe the blessedness that the gods enjoy and also to denote the state of godlike blessedness in the afterlife. It is much more than 'happy'.

We have all been blessed by God this year, in so many different ways, and in spite of the problems that we, I am sure, also had. We have been blessed.

But the blessings of Mary were of a different quality than how God blesses us normally. Mary's reality was that God had done something utterly extraordi-

nary. 'Mary, you are his favorite, to become pregnant of the Son of God.'

Mary must have gasped. 'God has chosen me, to become the mother of the Savior, the eternal Son of the most high God?'

Remember what the angel said to young Mary? '**You are highly favored**, the Lord is with you.' You are favored – that means – God had taken the initiative. Mary is full of grace because God was gracious to her.

And because God was gracious to her, the presence of Mary was also a blessing to people around her. Auntie Elisabeth understood this: With a loud voice she said: 'Why **am I** so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?'

What an honor that the woman who bears the Lord himself, that this woman comes into my home, is what Elisabeth says to her young niece. Because Mary is chosen and blessed by God with the honor to bring the Savior into the world, she is an immediate blessing for other people as well.

She is the *Theotokos*, the one carrying God into the world in a very physical manner. What an example is this young woman for us. Chosen and blessed by God, she immediately becomes a blessing for others.

Just as God has chosen **us** to receive his blessing, in order to be a blessing to others. How can we be the best blessing to others? By bringing the Son of God to the world.

Now we will focus on the *Believing* Mary

When the angel announced the message that she would have a baby boy, Mary was of course deeply shaken. The only thing she was able to ask, stammering I guess, was 'but how!' The message was shocking for this girl. 'I am not married yet, how can I have a baby!'

It is not hard for us to understand that the idea was *haraam* for Mary: she was a religious girl, she wanted to serve her God and she loved her Joseph, and she feared the reaction of the people in her village.

I can hardly believe that this young girl understood much of what the angel said. 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.' Unintelligible words for this girl in shock. But God had spoken, that was clear to Mary, and therefore her response was: 'I am the Lord's servant; may it be to me as you have said.'

What an incredibly special moment in world history this was. Mary was not pregnant yet; the angel announced that it would happen, not that it had hap-

pened already.

And the virgin Mary, not pregnant yet, obediently, reverently, accepts the will of God for her life, as she wants to serve God. Just think of it for a moment. What would have happened if Mary had responded differently? If she had not faithfully and obediently accepted God's plans with her life? The choice of this woman was of cosmic importance.

Her faith and obedience were the door for God to bring the Savior into the world. May **we**, with **our** faith and obedience, be an instrument for our Lord.

And after Mary accepted the words of the angel obediently, she continued to have faith that God would fulfill his promises. Elisabeth underlined this faith that she saw in Mary. She said: 'Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.'

After Elisabeth has finished her prayer, her song of joy, Mary sang her own song of praise to God. In this song we get a glimpse of her life of faith. Mary liberally quotes from the Jewish Scriptures; this in itself is a great example for us – she knew her Bible. And how she quotes the Scriptures shows how she viewed herself.

In her song, it is not always easy to see whether she speaks of Israel, or of her own life. And maybe this actually reflects her faith-life: she internally, in her soul, experienced all the ups and downs of all the people of God as her own ups and downs.

Mary realized that only God's grace and mercy could lift her up, feed her, help her. At the most crucial moment in human history, Mary puts her hands in the hand of God, trusting Him obediently. She did not know what her pregnancy would lead to, she could not oversee the consequences, but she said: Lord, if this is what you want from me, please do it.

May we be able to have the same faith and obedience to our Lord in our crucial moments in life. He wants to bless us, and if we follow him obediently, He will make us a blessing for many people. But do we dare? Are we ready, do we dare to say: 'I am the Lord's servant; may it be to me as you have said'?

Yes, do we **dare**? It would be one-sided to speak of faith and blessings in our life, without also speaking of the downside. The blessings of God are very sure; for Mary, it meant the presence of God in her life in the most direct manner imaginable. For us, it means God with us, now and unto eternity. It is not hard to speak of faith and obedience in this context.

But do not forget the heartaches of Mary. Her faith and the blessings of God, they also hurt her deeply.

Let us now briefly focus on Broken Mary

To begin with, it was clear that her fiancée did not immediately believe the story she told him. Her lovely fiancée, faithful Joseph, he believed initially that Mary had committed adultery. She must have

been heartbroken. And beside that, she must have been scared to death.... What would her family do, the village, if they saw her as an adulteress? Imagine the deep fears of this girl.

What would it mean anyway, bearing the Son of God? Mary could not oversee the consequences. There must have been much darkness in her mind and heart.

And I can even imagine that she would have been worried, that she would actually bear a daughter? No-one would ever believe her again... The consequences for her life would be disastrous. What a relief when at the birth of the child, it was a son indeed...

And then, when she went to the temple with Joseph and her healthy baby-son, jubilant and so happy that she had this boy, then Simeon, a pious Jew, predicted:

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."
(Luke 2:34-35)

From the very beginning of her pregnancy to the end of Jesus' life, Mary's heart must have been in turmoil. To be chosen and blessed by God and to be a faithful person does not mean that life becomes a rose garden. Mary was a woman of great sorrows.

We see this in the gospels, especially when Mary is watching her own Son's death at the cross. When his side is pierced with a spear, when he dies in God-forsaken darkness, Mary's soul is also pierced and darkness overwhelms her.

Yes, indeed, there was the great joy of seeing her risen Son on Easter morning, just as we look forward to our own Easter morning when we will be forever with our Lord. But for now, our life reflects the life of Mary.

God is blessing us, we believe in Him, but this goes hand in hand with sorrows. This is the normal pattern of the life. God offers light and life for those who believe in Jesus Christ; He offers us eternal life with Him. Blessings enough!

But while in this world, we continue to groan with all creation for the renewal of our world, and of our own life. Many of us suffer from heartaches, sorrows, loneliness, fears. God is with us to soften the hurting, but this does not negate that life is sometimes very painful. As Christians, our faith regularly leads us into situations of problems, simply because the Christian faith is counter-cultural.

Our very presence as Christians alone, especially if we live a life of faith as Mary, the Mother of Jesus did, often incites resistance by others.

Conclusion – Imitating Mary

Bit in the midst of the pains in life, let us follow

Mary's model for life with God. She was hurting throughout her life. Her soul was pierced. But she also knew: God has favored me; He has chosen me. What a relief!

And God's goodness was her anchor; in faith she held on to Him. This faith enabled her to bring the Son of God into the World, and to be a great blessing

to all mankind. That is why we still speak about her, Mary, mother of our Lord, blessed, believing, broken, with great reverence and love.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.