

Derek's Maiden Mass

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Isa 61: 10-end

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Gal 4:4-7

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Luke 1:46-55

Introduction:

Joy to be invited to speak on this auspicious occasion ... Derek's Maiden Mass!

The joy of the occasion resonates beautifully with the reading from Isa 61.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

And this Mass has many similarities to a nuptial Mass - we certainly have the equivalent of well-dressed bridegroom here in Derek, who is offering himself to Church in service as a priest. In scripture the Church is of course often likened to a bride, but of course the bridegroom is Christ. And he is here, represented by Derek today at the holy table, and we represent his Church

1. Mary's 'Yes' and the priesthood

As a Maiden Mass, it is especially fitting that Derek has chosen readings however invite us to contemplate his new ministry against the background of the part played by Mary in the story of Jesus and the gospel.

God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Without Mary there is no Jesus, without Jesus there is no Church, and thus no call for ministers, whether deacons or priests.

Mary is rightly remembered by St Luke for her 'yes' to God when the archangel Gabriel visited her:

"Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:28)
"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."
(Luke 1: 37)

Her 'yes' and her faith is contrasted by Luke with the hesitancy of Zechariah the priest when the same angel visited him. The woman on the margins was much more receptive to the messenger than the priest who was blessed with special task of offering the holy incense to God.

Mary's 'yes' allowed the holy God to send his Spirit to overshadow her and to give birth to the Messiah and his mission. Nicola Slee has explored aspects of Mary's

life in poetry in her *The Book of Mary* (SPCK, 2007). Her poem, 'Mary says Yes', is deeply expressive, even if a little biological:

I did say Yes to the angel's word
I assented to lightening and sword

Yes to the body's ripening
Yes to the vagina's opening
Yes to breasts swelling and oozing milk
Yes to the womb's shedding of its fruit.

I made my Yes to this strange child
Mine and never mine
Yours to take from me
I screamed as they pulled him from my side

There were long years after he had gone
I had to learn to say Yes all over again

I will say Yes to the memories
Yes to the things I'll never understand
Yes to the need they had to turn to me
Yes to the Spirit stirring my mind

Now old, I turn away from the past
I say Yes to what has been and what will last
I pray for courage as I face the approach of death
that my Yes may last me through my final breath. *The Book of Mary, 2007,*
p. 16.

Discipleship the greatest calling, and priesthood which is one way which discipleship is worked out is to follow Mary in her 'Yes' to God. For Derek, the Yes has led to this moment. He has been invited to take part in God's work too and he like Mary has learned to say 'Yes'. He in turn has opened himself to God coming in his holiness to overshadow him and we trust that great fruitfulness will be the outcome. But what might that look like?

Well, I would suggest that it will a journey of daily 'Yeses' and a ministry which will be about helping others to say Yes as well. It will be

Yes to the things I'll never understand
Yes to the need they had to turn to me
Yes to the Spirit stirring my mind

2. Mary's Song

Mary, unlike Zechariah, is from the margins, and she sings a song for those on the margins. Her song is the stuff of the revolutionary. Echoing the ancient song of Hannah, she anticipates that her son will start something that is intent on turning upside down the world order.

Derek too is from margins (if Manchester can be thought of in those terms!) and he is deeply aware that he is called to minister as priest to those on the margins here in Jesmond. His diaconal year at St George's has been one in which he has sought to work with those who feel isolated and hurt by loneliness and mental health difficulties. He is deeply passionate about helping St George's to be a nurturing and inclusive community of worship. To do this, St George's will need to embrace and celebrate the increasingly diverse range of peoples in the parish and city of Newcastle.

On his retreat, Derek was encouraged by Revd Dr Sarah Hills to think of himself as a reconciled reconciler, and she explored with the ordinands the global context in which political populism and anxiety about identity are making the call to embrace and celebrate diversity is very challenging.

Knowing that God loves us as he has made us is the key to being a reconciled reconciler, and I know that for Derek self-acceptance has been a vital part of his journey. Knowing how deeply loved he is will enable him to help others to find that acceptance with God that allows for genuine transformation and growth.

Certainly Mary knew something of this as she struggled with being a mother to Jesus in circumstances that invited misunderstanding among the villagers in Nazareth. Equally she would have learned that she had a part to play in the task of 'filling the hungry with good things'. Mothers learn to feed the hungry at home first! Again, Nicola Slee's poetry, captures this well- 'Mary bakes bread':

There never was an end to the baking,
never an end to the pounding of wheat,
the sifting of flour,
mixing of leaven,
the kneading, the proving, the rising, the baking.

My hands were never still,
My hands were always working.
My hands prayed the flour, felt stillness in their moving
God's hands in my hands, working.

There was never an end to the hunger
Always mouths to feed,
bodies to fill,

stories to sift,
desires of spirit and flesh to assuage.

My hands were never still.
My hands were endlessly lifting the bread from the enormous oven,
letting the fragrance carry in the early morning air,
placing loaves to cool,
breaking them, still warm,
to be passed among hungry men and children.

There was never an end to the hunger.
God was hungry for justice and the land's freedom,
for the lifting of the people's burden.
My hands couldn't stop working,
kneading the bread,
to ease the hunger of God.

My hands prayed the hunger,
God's hands in my hands,
working, working.

The Book of Mary, 2007, p. 82.

As Derek begins his ministry as a priest, may God help him to share in this work of feeding the hungry, God's hands in his hands, 'praying the hunger'. Of course he will do this work in the Eucharist, but that will be a focus of whole life work of seeking to help the hungry find bread.

But Derek will need to remember that just as he is a reconciled reconciler, he is also one of the hungry who has found the place, the One, in whom all his deepest hungers are satisfied. And his task is not simply to help the hungry to find bread, but to learn how to feed themselves.

Conclusion:

So Derek has said 'Yes', and he is now sent to help us to say 'Yes' to God.

Derek has come from the margins himself and he is called as a reconciled reconciler to help those on the margins to discover there is a place for them at the heart of God's inclusive community.

Derek has found the bread that meets his deepest needs. As he begins his priestly ministry he is seeking to learn how to make bread with which will feed the hungry. But he is also called to help the hungry to learn how to do likewise.

David (11 Oct 2020)