

The more things change...

The more things change: There's an old saying that I'm sure you're all familiar with, that says, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." It actually originates with a French writer, Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, who wrote in a journal published in 1849, "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*"... well, he was French, after all! It translates literally as "The more it changes, the more it's the same thing."

I've found myself thinking about that in the run-up to Christmas. You don't need me to tell you that this year has not been like others. The Covid-19 virus has changed the world, and changed every one of our lives. One of the words that has been used most often in describing the events of the years is "unprecedented". There has been nothing quite like it ever before.

As Christmas approaches we've been told that it's not going to be like other Christmases, and I've been very aware of that myself as, for the first time in many years, I can't go down to my mum and dad's this year. Two or three weeks ago I sat in my car in tears for a few moments before going into Aldi to do my shopping because of a sign that said, "There's nothing quite like Christmas!", and I couldn't help thinking that this year *Christmas* wasn't going to be quite like Christmas.

The powers that be have said that we should be prepared this year for a virtual Christmas. We've been advised that although there will be a relaxation of restrictions for five days there are still strict limits on what we can do... even now I'm giving you notes instead of preaching to you in person! Christmas shopping hasn't been normal, we can't sing carols together, there won't be large family gatherings.

But as the world has focused on how things are different this year I have been thinking more of what is *not* different, and realising that the most important things are still the same. Perhaps a reduced emphasis on some of the *trappings* of Christmas can actually help us to focus on what it's *really* about. It's still about *Jesus' birth*, and there's nothing preventing us from celebrating that... the more things change, the more they stay the same!

Mary... chosen by God: With that in mind I want to think a bit about Mary, and the timeless, unchanging truths of her story.

A staple of TV schedules is still soap operas. They have been disrupted to some degree by Covid-19, but continue week by week. Whether it's *Coronation Street* or *Eastenders* or one of the others, most people watch one or more of them. I avoid most of them like the plague (now there's a topical metaphor!), but I admit that I do follow *Neighbours*. One of the story-lines there at the moment concerns a gay couple who want a child of their own and are considering options for surrogacy.

Leaving aside the gay element, it struck me that there is nothing new about surrogacy. In bringing to fulfilment his plan for the salvation of mankind, centuries in the making, God *chose* Mary as his surrogate, to carry and give birth to his son. We read that, "God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary." vv26-27.

This was not some random chance, it was God's deliberate choice. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God had been working towards the restoration of his people, and now the time had come for a massive step forward. It won't surprise you to know that I have a song in my head at this point. It may seem a little irreverent, but I can imagine God singing the old *Foreigner* hit, "I've been waiting for a girl like you"...

Gabriel told Mary she had "found favour with God" v30, and that she would "conceive and give birth to a son" v31 who would "be called the Son of the Most High" v32 and whose "kingdom will never end" v33.

It's an understatement to say that choosing Mary was a pretty big deal. I hope that whenever we have a big decision to make we think carefully about it and weigh up all the pros and cons before making a choice. God is no different. He had had centuries to think about it, and if he made the wrong choice it could significantly set back his plans. But God is not like us... he *never* makes wrong choices.

Mary... chaste: So why did he choose Mary, of all the women in the world that he might have chosen? He could have chosen someone rich, powerful... someone who could have given the child every possible advantage in life. But he chose instead someone completely ordinary, someone from a humble background, someone who, on the face of it, was no different to any of countless others.

The first thing that made Mary stand out and made her the right choice was something that could, in other circumstances, have been a problem. Mary may have been simple, in the sense of being uncomplicated, but she wasn't stupid, and as Gabriel told her what was to happen she immediately pointed out what seemed like an obvious flaw in the plan... "How will this be... since I am a virgin?" v34. To use another word, and keep the alliteration that we preachers love so much, Mary was *chaste*. She knew where babies came from, and she knew she had never slept with Joseph, or with any man for that matter, so couldn't possibly be pregnant.

God was way ahead of her. This was not a *flaw* in the plan, but the *fulfilment* of it. God knew when he sent Gabriel to Mary that she was a virgin v27, and that had been his plan all along. Hundreds of years earlier he had made a promise through the prophet Isaiah, saying, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son" *Isaiah 7:14*.

Some commentators have pointed out that the word Isaiah used, *almah*, doesn't have to mean "virgin", but can be simply translated as "young girl". That may be so, but the fulfilment in Mary of the prophecy makes the intended meaning crystal clear. There would be nothing remarkable in a young girl giving birth to a child, but for a virgin to do so was unmistakably a miracle and *could only be the work of God*.

Mary's choice: The third thing I want to look at about Mary was the choice she made. We've seen that she was *chosen* by God, and that she was *chaste*, but it's also vital to recognise that she too made a *choice*.

God is all-powerful, or omnipotent if you want to use the fancy theological word. He could very easily force people to do his will. But he doesn't. He doesn't want his children to worship him and serve him because they are forced to do so, but because they choose to, and he gives them free will to make that choice.

Look at how Mary responds to Gabriel, and imagine how you might respond if an angel appeared to you. It must have been quite overwhelming, to say the least, to be visited by an angel at all, and then to have that angel showing deference to you and calling you "highly favoured" v28 must have been mind-blowing. It's little wonder that Mary was "greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be" v29.

And as if that weren't enough Gabriel then goes on to tell her that, "the power of the Most High will overshadow you", and the child she will give birth to "will be called the Son of God" v35. I imagine most girls in such circumstances would have been saying, "Now hold on just a minute, mister!", or something rather more colourful and less polite!

She was just a girl, possibly as young as 12, and it was a massive thing to ask of her. She could hardly have been blamed if she had said no and run as fast and as far as she could from Gabriel. But incredibly, to her enormous and eternal credit, she said, "I am the Lord's servant... May your word to me be fulfilled" v38.

She made a choice to say "Yes" to God. She completely and without hesitation or reservation accepted his plan for her life and put his will before her own. I think our Roman Catholic friends go too far in their veneration of Mary, but she does at the very least set a shining example of obedience to God.

As with all great servants of the Lord, whether in the bible or more recently, Mary's story began with a choice... and just like God did when he chose her, she made the *right* one.

Conclusion: So as Christmas draws near, instead of looking at all the changes this year and being upset that Christmas won't be the same, be glad and rejoice because it *will* be, because it's still a celebration of Jesus' birth and of the salvation he brings for all the world. And then remember Mary, ask God what task he has for *you*, and be ready to say "Yes" to him.