



When that angel appeared and told her that she was to be the mother of God's son, Mary was first bewildered, then no more than mildly acquiescent. *If it is what God wants, then let it happen.* You can almost picture her shrugging her shoulders. I don't think she knows whether she is sleeping or waking.

But then she goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also pregnant, despite thinking that she was well past her child-bearing age. As Elizabeth tells Mary her own story of an angel speaking to her husband, the women's eyes meet and, you know those moments when you are talking to someone and suddenly the hairs on the back of your neck stand up? You realise that you are both telling the same story; you have both had a similar experience; you thought your feelings were just an illusion, a stupidity but here is someone who feels and thinks the same and it all starts to make sense. You do not know whether to laugh or cry.

I think this is how it was with Mary and Elizabeth and it was only then that Mary took on board the fact that there was something very mysterious, yet very real going on.

She sings that famous song we know as the "Magnificat," looking both back and forward at human life. Although the shadows of fear and oppression, violence and injustice are still there, Mary is starting to understand them in a new way.

Her people had believed for centuries that God was on the side of the powerful and of the prosperous. So when they were poor and helpless, it looked as though God had abandoned them. But now Mary sees that God is actually on the side of the poor.

Power and prosperity are not signs of God's favour. And when power and prosperity are the result of bullying and cheating-and all too often they are-, these people were no friends of God. It was they who were abandoned by God and they who would come to nothing in the end. But when the poor and the humble kept their faith in God; when they stood up for goodness and justice, faith and integrity, then they would know God and they would remain close to God, no matter what happened.

It was she, a peasant girl who would bear the child called the Son of God before whom even Roman Emperors would come to kneel. It was Elizabeth, whose husband was a priest in a religion despised by Romans, who would have a son destined to be a great prophet and even Roman soldiers would come to listen to him.

Mary was not re-writing history but she was reinterpreting it in a new light. The past, even with its pain and injustice, was starting to make some sense. The future, even with its uncertainties, had some hope. Like Emma, she feels the pain of the past and the fear of the future but she is determined to have some understanding of who she is and where her life fits into the scheme of things.

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Life and human nature being what they are, there are always going to be shadows of the past inside us. How many times have I wished for an "off" switch in my brain, which can wipe out the memories which hurt me, the memories which make me cringe with shame, the memories which wind me up in anger. But even if we are strong-willed enough to pretend that there is an "of-switch" and keep pushing painful memories away, telling ourselves "I'm over it, I'm over it, I'm over it," it does not work. The pain just festers secretly, and then erupts into an illness or a sudden outburst of temper or a persistently unreasonable attitude. Our past has made us what we are now: we cannot just switch it off.

Emma's past as a spoiled little rich girl without a mother had made her proud, somewhat arrogant and rather self-contained. That is what she is. She cannot help it and she cannot change it. Mary's past as a poor, scared, downtrodden woman has

made her fearful, somewhat apathetic and also, I suspect, a little cynical. That is what she is. She cannot help it and she cannot change it. There is no “off” switch for them.

Nor is there likely to be a dramatic change in the circumstances which have made them what they are. Emma will remain rich, spoiled and at the head of her local society. Mary will remain poor and pushed around by her local society.

In fairy stories, soap operas and Mills and Boon novels, people can walk away from their past: they board a bus, get on a plane or are whisked off to paradise by some millionaire and all their troubles are miraculously over. But in real life, even if you can make dramatic changes in your lifestyle, the baggage from your past still goes with you and sooner or later it confronts you.

So where does this leave us? Walking around like Marley’s ghost with chains around our ankles?

The Bible does not offer an “off” switch.

The Bible does not offer a dramatic change in our circumstances.

The Bible does offer a way forward.

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Isaiah spoke of paths being made, even in desert places, for God to walk down.

He spoke of God’s light shining in the places of shadow.

He spoke of God’s forgiveness offered to those who have made a mess of their own lives and the lives of others as well.

The desert places, the shadow places, the guilt places become, in our lives, the sacred places in which God meets us.

And once God has met us in those places, they look different and they feel different to us because they are no longer dead ends of pain, fear and guilt but open routes to wisdom, faith and love. These places no longer have “reject” or “sub-standard” stamped on them but “precious” and “highly charged.”

Because, you see, with God nothing is wasted. God, if you like, is the ultimate “recycler.” God can take pain and guilt, anger and devastation and transform them into something new and wonderful. The Bible is filled with people’s stories of their own recycled lives.

Joseph: handsome, bright, spoiled and full of himself- rather like Jane Austen’s Emma- ending up as a slave in Egypt. But, despite all he suffered, his encounter with God there became a means of channelling his pain, his energy and his intelligence into saving the lives of thousands of people during years of famine.

Moses: taken from his natural parents at birth and brought up by the foreigners who had turned his people into slaves. His confusion and anger at finding out who he was led him to murder and ignominious flight. But again, once he had encountered God in the desert, his strength, his anger and his early training made him the leader who would rescue his people from slavery and get them across their desert.

David: the poor shepherd boy, pushed out of the way by his six older and stronger brothers, becoming, by a series of unforeseen events, the King of Israel. Unused to power, he made some mistakes, the most notorious of which was getting someone else’s wife pregnant, then having to arrange for her husband- away on active service- to be killed. His guilt threatened to overpower him altogether: read Psalm 51 if you want to see just how bad he felt. But he encountered God even in this terrible place

