

## Mary: The Grace of Availability

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 12 December 2010, by David Gill. The readings for the third Sunday of Advent were Isaiah 35:1-10, James 5:7-10, St Matthew 11:2-11.*

Using words is only one way, often not a very good way, of expressing the Christian faith.

Our spiritual ancestors realized that long ago. They began to employ music and song, gesture and movement, candles and incense, colour and symbolism, to speak of the wonder that is beyond words. They put up great buildings that pointed human hearts to God. They painted, carved, sculpted and embroidered. And, with stained glass, they started using church windows for inspiration as well as education.

Take this building. St Stephen's has quite an array of stained glass. Here in the sanctuary, downstairs in the hall and in various nooks and crannies, you will find lots of it, recalling stories of the Bible and key convictions of the Church. You will also find pointers to places and events that have had special significance for our people -- badges of the cities of Edinburgh and Sydney, for example; the crest of the University of Sydney; a picture of John Flynn Memorial Church in Alice Springs; even the badge of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. And there are at least two Burning Bushes!

The main window is the one you're looking at now, the big Armstrong Sutherland Window behind me. It's difficult to see the detail from the pews. Those of you with a head for heights might like to clamber up here after the service to examine it more closely.

In the centre are three panels – faith, hope and love, the middle one portraying Christ in glory. In the block on your left, four great figures of the Hebrew scriptures – Abraham, Moses, David and Ezekiel. On your right, four key figures of the Christian scriptures – John the Baptist, St John, St Paul and the patron of this church, St Stephen.

Which should be fine. They are all worthy men – and I do mean men! But something's wrong. This colourful exercise in Christian education has a flaw. Someone important is missing. Can you identify the absentee?

It is Mary, the mother of the Lord! Without Mary there would be no St Stephen's, no Church, no Christian faith, no Jesus. Yet she doesn't get a look in. Maybe our forbears assumed that religious leadership is men's business. Maybe old-style Protestant prejudice got the better of the window's designer. Whatever the explanation, Mary fell right out of the picture. Which, alas, she sometimes still does.

This Advent, let's put Mary where she belongs – at least in our hearts and minds, if not in our window. Let's restore her to a place of honour.

We know, of course, that Mary is not alone in the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. They portray pious, obedient, faithful Jewish people finding the meaning of their lives in being part of what God is doing in and for the world. The parents and relatives of Jesus, and their friends, and eventually people like John the Baptist, give themselves gladly, hopefully, expectantly, to playing their parts in the fulfillment of the divine purpose.

Among them, Mary is central. The mother of Jesus, like all religious figures, has suffered from her admirers. Those of us who come out of the Protestant bit of the Christian family have been suspicious of the veneration of Mary, and given the excesses of years past that is hardly surprising. But maybe our Protestant reaction has itself been an excess. Mary has a unique place in the saga of salvation. Her place as a continuing inspiration to the faithful should be equally special.

“Blessed are you among women!” This, according to Luke's gospel, was the Spirit-inspired verdict of Mary's cousin Elizabeth. The same conviction has been echoed by believers through twenty centuries. Blessed are you, Mary, the bearer of God. Blessed are you, the one who was totally available, entirely obedient to the divine purpose. Blessed are you, the exemplar of godliness for all ages.

Here, then, is the counterpoint to the mess humanity knows itself to be in. Sin, we realize, is less a matter of infringing certain rules than a far-reaching separation, alienation, estrangement between us and God, and between human beings themselves. By the same token, holiness is less a matter of adhering to certain rules than a far-reaching availability, sensitivity, responsiveness to the purposes of God.

Some of what passes for Christian piety at present is getting this seriously wrong. We hear a lot of what might be called “Instant Gratification Christianity” – which in fact is Western consumerism writ large and given a religious gloss. This warped gospel proclaims “Believe thus and so, and everything in your life will fall neatly into place. Commit yourself to Christ, and watch your business prosper. Insert a prayer into the great cosmic slot machine, and out will roll a can of whatever your heart most desires”.

Mary’s faith centred on God, not herself; on patient availability for the achievement of God’s purposes, not instant gratification in the achievement of her own.

Advent calls us to a renewed availability to God. That means offering God our gifts, our strengths. But it also means offering our weaknesses, our failures, our sins. They too, by God’s grace, may be taken up and used to his glory.

At this holy time the Australian churches provide us with a tangible means for giving expression to our availability.

Each year since 1949, the churches of Australia have had their Christmas Bowl Appeal. Every year since 1949, we have sought to reach out together in Christ’s name to the hungry, the refugees, the downtrodden, the exploited, those the world would prefer to forget. It’s the movement for Christian unity, with its sleeves rolled up. This morning you have received the Christmas bowl envelopes. I commend the Bowl for your sacrificial support.

But when all the cheques are signed, when the last envelope is in, what then of your availability to God, and of mine? When our spiritual resources are so limited, our strength is so fragile, our faith so hesitant, our need so great?

Then it is that you and I are recalled to the paradox of the gospel: namely, that dying and living, giving and receiving, seeking the fulfillment of others and finding fulfillment ourselves, are but opposite sides of one and the same coin.

That paradox is expressed powerfully in a prayer I quoted some months ago. That prayer has meant a lot to me, especially at times when the going has been rough. Some of you asked for the words, so here they are again.

*Lord, when I am hungry, give me someone to feed.*

*When I am thirsty, give me someone whose thirst I may assuage.*

*And when I am cold, someone to clothe.*

*When I am sad, give me someone to cheer.*

*When my burden is heavy, give me also those of others,  
and when I need love, may others ask for mine.*

*May your will be my food,  
your grace my strength and  
your love my rest.*

*May my whole life be a gift perpetually offered to you, O Father,  
until the day when you are pleased to receive it back again.*

As Mary I'm sure would have been the first to say: Amen, Lord. Amen.

\*