



Study 2 - Blessed Mothers



Pinturicchio, part of The Annunciation_c1501



'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her.' (Luke 1:38)



Which part of the whole Advent story do you find most interesting and which one challenges you the most?

The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;
'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria!

'For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be,
all generations laud and honour thee,
thy son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold;
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria!

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
'To me be as it pleaseth God,' she said,
'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name':
most highly favoured lady.
Gloria!

Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ was born
in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world will ever say
'Most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria!

(Originally a Basque folk carol, paraphrased by Sabine Baring-Gould, 1834-1924)

The carol

This was originally a Basque folk carol about the visitation and words of the Archangel Gabriel to Mary, originally based on Angelus Ad Virginem, a medieval carol, which was itself a poem based upon the Hail Mary and the Annunciation.

Probably Franciscan in origin, it was brought to Britain by French friars in the 13th century and is said to have originally consisted of 27 stanzas, with each following stanza beginning with the consecutive letter of the alphabet.

it was collected by Charles Bordes and then paraphrased by Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924) who had spent a winter as a boy in the Basque country.

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Angels - a brief guide

(Read Genesis Nehemiah 9:6; Genesis 28:11-13; Hebrews 1:13-14, 13:2; Luke 1:11,26-28)

Angels appear in the stories of several religions, and the Bible tells us that they are a part of God's creation, a heavenly host. The word 'angel' comes to us from the Latin word *angelus* (meaning 'messenger') and the equivalent Hebrew word may refer to both human and supernatural messengers.

Daniel is the first Biblical writer to refer to individual angels by name, mentioning both Gabriel and Michael in Daniel 9:21 and 10:13, as part of his apocalyptic visions. There are no other named angels in the Hebrew Bible.

The angels are represented throughout the Christian Bible as spiritual beings operating between God and humankind (Psalms 8:4-5) and it seems that angels cannot usually be seen by humans unless God reveals them (2 Kings 6:17, Luke 2:13).

The New Testament includes many interactions and conversations between angels and humans, as in those surrounding the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.



1: Where do you stand regarding angels and how they are depicted in the Bible?

2: Belief in guardian angels can be found throughout history, confirmed by early Christian writers Jerome and Thomas Aquinas, who say they are for the protection of individuals on their journey of faith. Does this idea seem a reasonable concept to you?

Blessèd Mothers - Sarah

(Read Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-7)

The story of Abraham and Sarah (or Sarai as she was) covers several chapters of Genesis. The promise of a son to Abraham meant a 25 year wait before the actual birth of Isaac. Sarah would not win an award for patience, even laughing at one point at the idea that God would give her a child. She also tried to speed the process up by letting her maid Hagar have a child by Abraham. The result was a child, but not the child, and a lot of ill feeling between the two women.

Fortunately, God was willing to overlook any weakness in Sarah's faith and when the time was right, Isaac was born and she could laugh again with joy. "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." Then she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (Genesis 21:6-7)

Isaac would become the father of Jacob and grandfather of the twelve tribes of Israel.



Jan Provoost - Abraham, Sarah, and the Angel, c1520

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? 3: Sarah in her impatience tries to do God's work for him, even blaming God for preventing her building a family, and her husband is complicit in this (Genesis 16:1-2). How do you view this episode, bearing in mind the importance of Abraham in God's plans?

4: What is the message to us, not about childbearing but in our hopes and expectations of God working in and through us?

Blessèd Mothers – Samson's mother

(Read Judges 13)

We do not know what Samson's mother was called, she is simply known as the barren and childless wife of Manoah, until the day when an angel appears to inform her that she is to bear a child.

The angel advises that she abstain from alcohol and unclean food whilst pregnant, and that no razor touch the child's head because he is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb.

She runs to her husband and tells him what's happened. 'A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome....!'

Manoah struggles to understand what's happened, so prayerfully asks God to send this 'person' again with a little more advice. A few days later God does as he's been asked, albeit initially to the wife.

God realises that Manoah needs something a little extra in order to believe, as the story then relates. His wife meanwhile has simply accepted what the angel told her, and Samson will be born healthy, grow up strong, and in time become the last of the judges mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

? 5: Manoah's wife struggled to describe the angel of God (she begins saying 'a man of God' which would normally refer to a prophet). How might that feed into our understanding of Hebrews 13:2?

6: Samson is remembered for his long hair and great strength but has also been called 'wayward and unpredictable, but still used by God'. Is there a message for us here?

Blessèd Mothers – Mary, Elizabeth and Hannah

(Read Luke 1:26-38, 46-55)

There are similarities between these three mothers, blessed by God with the gift of a child. They are all given an insight as to how these children fit into God's purposes. For Sarah, her son Isaac would be a foundation stone in the building up of a nation.

For Manoah's wife it was the knowledge that her son would be set apart, dedicated to God for life, and for Mary it is trying to understand the

enormity of what she has been told, that her son will be called the Son of the Most High and be handed the throne of David by God, along with a kingdom that will never end.

Mary spends much of her pregnancy at the house of an elderly kinswoman Elizabeth, another mother-to-be who had thought herself unable to have a child until her husband Zechariah had an angelic visitation telling him

they would have a son (who we know as John the Baptist). Elizabeth feels the baby in her womb move as Mary speaks, and interprets the movement as the baby leaping for joy. Mary is moved to poetry and a song we know as the Magnificat, based upon the words of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

Hannah was one of two wives of Elkinah in 1 Samuel, and desperately sad not to be able to conceive. One day she's in the temple weeping, while the High Priest Eli was present. He thought she was drunk but after listening to her story and her promise to give a son (should she have one) back in service to God, Eli blesses her and sends her home. She conceives and gives birth to Samuel who, after weaning, is presented to the temple.

Samuel would play a key role in the transition from the period of the biblical judges to the institution of a kingdom under Saul, and again in the transition from Saul to David.

So many connections to mothers who are enabled by God to have children who would become an important part of the nation's history and link into the story of Jesus Christ.



Jacques Daret, *The Visitation*, 1435



7: Upon hearing the angel's words, we are told that Mary hurried off to stay with Elizabeth for three months. Why might that be?

8: The child is to be called by a very common name, as around ancient 100 tombs have been discovered in Jerusalem inscribed with the name Jesus. Does that say anything about how God relates to Humankind?

9: Mary's lovely song is framed around Scripture's words (particularly Hannah's prayer). What does it tell us of Mary's understanding of God?

10: Is this song purely one of joy and thanksgiving directed from Mary to God, or can it speak into our own personal faith journeys?

Prayer Points



Pray for all who have felt a call on their lives by God and are unsure what the next step might be.

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