

24 December 2017

2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16

Luke 1.26-38

Affirming and accepting

We all need affirmation and acceptance.

We know what an impact the opposite of these have upon us.

- being rejected
 - the last child to be picked for team games
- being undermined
- being dismissed
- being put down
- being misunderstood
- being ignored

Good parenting is about allowing children to grow up knowing that they are affirmed and accepted.

Affirmation and acceptance is not about not correcting a child. It's not about not challenging a child to strive for the best. It is not about never saying anything negative to the child.

It is about giving the child the strong sense that they are loved for who they are ... that that love is unconditional ... it is about the child growing up knowing that they are deeply valued, so that the child learns to value himself or herself ... and that they are affirmed and accepted even when they are making mistakes ...

This is about giving the child the deep sense of inner security.

If children grow up with the narrative that they are 'good for nothing', that what they do is 'never enough'; if children grow up

always being put down, ignored, their confidence always undermined, that will have a damaging impact on their self-image, on how they see themselves ...

Affirmation and acceptance are key to our well-being, to living healthy lives.

If we are not affirmed and accepted by others, it is difficult to affirm and accept ourselves.

The story of Mary is a story of affirmation and acceptance.

Mary is affirmed and accepted by God. God's messenger, Gabriel, greets Mary with the words, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured."

Now, I think Luke wants us to read here – '*Mary of all people!*'

Earlier in the chapter Luke has introduced us to a much older couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Luke tells us quite a bit about Zechariah and Elizabeth.

They had good breeding, apart from anything else.

Zechariah was of the priestly division of Abijah. Zechariah was a priest. Elizabeth herself was a descendant of Aaron.

This in itself would have given them status and standing.

Luke also tells us that they were "upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly."

Here were people of good character.

They also had seniority on their side. They lived at a time when age was respected.

The only social blemish was that they were childless.

But with all that they had going for them, it probably wasn't that much of a surprise to the readers of Luke's story that God should send an angel to Zechariah while he was serving in the temple.

But when Luke comes to tell the story of Mary, he doesn't give any of these markers.

Luke has gone out of his way to tell us the family background of Zechariah and Elizabeth. He even slips in something similar for Joseph – Joseph is of the house of David.

But for Mary ... nothing.

The only thing that we know about Mary is that she is a virgin.

Now this piece of information becomes important as the story unfolds. But if you didn't know what was going to happen, this information would not have been seen as a point of virtue for Mary. Rather it would have been seen as putting her firmly in her place in the social pecking order

- it means she is young
- it means she is still under the roof of her father.

Women were well down the social scale ... and women who had not yet married were even further down the scale. She was still very much her father's daughter.

And what is more, the scene has now changed from the centre of things in Jerusalem, to this out of the way town called Nazareth, up north in Galilee.

Nor does Luke tell us anything about her character or her piety ...

He at least had a sentence to describe the parents-to-be of John the Baptist. But apparently nothing to remark about the mother-to-be of Jesus.

And I think that is quite intentional. I think Luke is wanting to make a point

And it is to *this* teenager that Gabriel comes and says, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured.'

She is a kind of 'everywoman' – and certainly every woman who has grown up in the shadows ... in the shadows of a world dominated by men, in the shadows of living in 'ordinaryville', in the shadows of 'not being noticed', in the shadows of 'you know your place in the world', in the shadows of 'nothing worthy of mention'.

It is to this young woman that God gives his affirmation and acceptance.

The choice of this young woman is an indicator – a sign – a foretaste – of all that God is doing in the world in sending his Son, Jesus ...

This is God's remarkable work of affirmation and acceptance of all of those who have thought themselves to be put down –

- who have lived believing that they are nobodies
- who have experienced life as an outsider
- who believe that they don't really fit
- who have lived struggling to love themselves, because they cannot believe that they are lovable
- who have a deep sense of self-loathing
- who have had to live life at the bottom of the pile, at the mercy of the powerful and the rich, the insiders and the arrogant

Mary is affirmed and accepted by God ...

Mary, of all people, is called to be the one to give birth to God's Messiah, to God's Son ...

And Mary recognises that in choosing her, God hasn't singled her out for favour in the sense of her being God's favourite, but because this is a sign of how God always works ...

... and this is a sign of what God is doing in his world by sending his Son ...

Mary is just the beginning. This is the extraordinary beginning of God offering his acceptance and affirmation to the least and the lowest ... to his turning the world upside down.

And in response Mary sings her song of praise and jubilation at the revolutionary and liberating work of God's acceptance and affirmation of the poor and the humble.

Luke 1.52-53

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

This is what the coming of Jesus into the world is all about – the story of God's affirmation and acceptance of the least and the lowest.

It called out of Mary her own response of affirmation and acceptance.

Affirmation and acceptance of God.

"I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said."

Accepting God's acceptance of her.

Affirming God's affirmation of her.

That kind of trust in God means also an accepting and affirming of ourselves ... as God accepts and affirms us ...

Accepting and affirming that we are a part of a wider work of God in the world.

That God hasn't done this because we have been singled out for special attention at the expense of others –

- but because we have been caught up in this work of God in the world in which God longs to offer his affirmation and acceptance to all.

... beginning with the least and the lowest ...

Mary affirmed and accepted is all of us, in need of God. Listen to this affirmation of Mary from Central America:

Mary the slumdweller

Mary who longed for the liberation of her people

Mary who sang to God of the poor

Mary homeless in Bethlehem

Mary of the longed-for Saviour

Mary, exiled from her native land

Mary, pilgrim with her people,

Blessed are you among women.