

# **Sermon on Sunday 18 December 2022**

## **by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader**

### **Will you play Mary?**

Matthew 1. 20 *'But after Joseph had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."'*



The fourth and last Sunday in Advent traditionally invites us to commemorate Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and we naturally think of St Luke's vivid account of the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, and her inspiring response in the song we know as the Magnificat.

But St Matthew gives us a brief and pointed narrative of the Annunciation to Joseph, a timely reminder that every story can be told through the eyes of at least two people, and no version of a story is complete on its own.

From my own childhood in draughty and dusty Methodist Sunday School halls and the village C of E Primary School, I have rich and fond memories of the routines, joys and tensions of the traditional children's Nativity play. I was lucky to be able to rediscover so much of the experience when my own boys were young.

A key moment in the year for many a schoolteacher or Junior Church leader is the choosing of the right children to play the central roles of the drama.

What follows is a poetic reimagining of Gabriel's visit to Nazareth, coloured by that experience of childhood Christmas. Gabriel speaks. The young people's response is left to the imagination.

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Will you play Mary this Christmas?

I'm sorry if I surprised you. I didn't want to upset you. There's nothing to be nervous about.

Will you play Mary?

Yes, I could ask someone else, but I think you are just the right person.

No, Mary, there won't be auditions, you won't be in a contest. No winners and losers, you won't have to go through hoops for anyone. The part is yours if you will take it.

Will you play Mary?

No, Mary, I can't show you the script. But no, you won't have to learn many lines. It is a long play and you will never be off the stage for long. But you will be free to improvise. There will always be someone to guide you and give you the right words.

No, Mary, there won't be long rehearsals for this play. There won't be any rehearsals at all. In this drama you will just have to go out and play your part. I trust you, you'll get it right on the night.

Will you be Mary?

Yes, Mary, we have chosen your co-star. Though he doesn't know just yet. You'll love him, I promise you. He will stand by you all through the play. I can let you into a little secret - you already know him well.

There's a little problem here, Mary. You will play a mother. No, you will be a mother. Don't be troubled, Mary, it's all in the plot. Your child will be the true star.

Does it have a happy ending? Mary, I can't tell you what happens in the play. No spoilers, Mary, not even for the co-stars! But maybe there does need to be a trigger warning.

'A sword will pierce your own heart'. I'm not sure I was supposed to tell you that just now, I think that is someone else's line, but really I feel I have to say it to you before I ask you one last time:

Mary, will you be Mary?

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Young man, will you play Joseph this Christmas?

I know you're not a man who is confident with words and speeches. That's OK. It's not a big speaking part. There won't be many lines for you to get right.

You are a man of deeds, a man of strong and skilled hands. But you like to do things right, I wouldn't ask you to play a character that didn't feel right to you.

Will you play Joseph?

I know you are not the kind of man who seeks to be in the public eye, under the spotlights. This role will suit you well. You are a natural support actor. Others will catch the eye of the crowd, but there could be no play without you.

Will you play Joseph?

You will play the role of a Father. This may be hard for you. Here, at least, you will have to be an actor, to play a role. For the child will not be your own. Are you man enough to play that part?

Joseph, carpenter of Nazareth, will you be Joseph?

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And what of you? There are so many parts to cast. What part will you play?

A shepherd, an innkeeper, an angel, a wise man?

A carer, a bank clerk, an IT programmer, a barista, a schoolteacher, a lawyer, a building labourer, a vicar, a delivery driver, a home maker: will you play your part in the story? No part can be left unfilled if the play is to be played to its end. Will you play your part, the part you are being offered now? You cannot see the script, for your part has not been written. You will write your own lines.

Will you share a stage with the Son of God? Will you play out your life in lively, honest dialogue with the son of Mary and Joseph? He is ready to share the stage with you, from overture to curtain call.

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Emanuel, God with us. God sharing the stage of human life with us. Not as a playwright, dictating the script from beginning to end; not as director, shaping the tones and pattern of the performance from his position off stage. But as our fellow actor, responding to our dialogues and cues,

meeting our characters as we meet his. If he will share that stage with us, will we share it with him? Sitting in the audience is not an option. He calls us all to come and play our part in the drama of redemption.

An angel is calling. Will you join with the words of Mary?  
'May it be with me according to Your word.'

Amen