

High St Uniting Church, Frankston

God of Grace

Luke 1:26 – 38



In many ways, Mary is the star of the nativity play. All the girls want the blue mantle, and if they're lucky, get to ride on a donkey. Very rarely does Jesus appear in a nativity play as an actual baby! Mary is the star. And it's the same with Luke's stories of Jesus birth; Mary is the star! Sure, the story is really about Jesus, but he doesn't do anything, just gets wrapped up and placed in a feeding trough by Mary. Sure, Elizabeth has just as miraculous conception, but the baby John in the womb still bows to Mary! Holy Mary, Mother of God for the Roman church, Theotokos, the God

bearer, for the Orthodox church. That understanding of Mary, together with some translation via Latin, gives us the Catholic version of Gabriel's greeting to Mary, "Hail Mary, full of grace." Rather different to the simple Greek of Luke, "Hail, favoured of God." A greeting that, Luke tells us, leaves Mary perplexed.

And it's not just Mary, we can get perplexed by Gabriel's greeting. Full of grace can lead the reader to think that it's about Mary; she is full of grace. Favourite, as I have seen in some translations, can also lead you to think it's about Mary; something about her makes her God's favourite. Favoured means it's about God; God is showing favour. But what does favour mean? What can it mean to be favoured by God? Consider last week's promise from Isaiah; the year of the Lord's favour is good news! Is it? Or did Mary feel like she was being called to the boss's office? Does being favoured by God end up meaning you owe God a favour? Maybe your understanding of favour is coloured by how you picture this encounter. Is Mary bowing or kneeling to Gabriel, or is Gabriel kneeling to Mary? Over the centuries, artists have pictured it both ways.

To help us understand, it's good to note that the Catholic version of Gabriel's greeting is not that far off. The Greek word we translate as favour – Charis – also means grace. But this is not Mary having grace, this is God displaying grace towards Mary. This young woman in Nazareth, a long way from the Temple and the accepted presence of God, is not someone special out of all the young women of Galilee and Judea. She is speaking of herself in her song of praise; "You have looked with favour on the lowliness of your servant. You have lifted the lowly." It is only through the grace of God that Mary is chosen to be the mother of Jesus, she is only special in her willingness to accept this gracious offer; "Here I am, the servant of the Lord."

While I understand the reverence towards Mary, considering all she went through in service to God, seeing here as a recipient of grace and not someone special opens, for all of us, the wonders of grace and the possibilities of service. You don't have to be special to be of service to God. The same message that comes with the story of the shepherds. Not because you are special, but because you have been shown grace. It's the message of Mary's song of praise. It's the message of Christmas, and indeed all of Jesus ministry. Our

God is a God of grace. It's not about worth, or talent, or wealth, or position. Mary is chosen from a small town in Galilee, Jesus is born in an animal stall, the angels sing praise to a bunch of shepherds. Not in Jerusalem, not among priests or the royal family, not in defiance of the Romans. Our God is a God of grace, showing favour to the smallest and the least.

We are the recipients of God's grace. We aren't special. We are favoured, not the favourite. And so, we are called to meet the world, and everyone we meet, with grace. We can't reserve the good news of God's love in Jesus for the 'right sort of people'. We can't reserve the good news for the strong, or powerful, who can then owe us a favour. And we can't keep it to ourselves; like the shepherds, let's go tell everyone we meet! The promised child to Mary, announced by Gabriel as the Son of the Most High, becomes God With Us, the great display of grace. Grace shown to Mary, grace shown to Joseph, grace shown to Zechariah and Elizabeth, grace shown to the shepherds. Grace flowing into the world. And that is the Good News of Christmas.