

Mary invites us to direct our effort towards achieving eternal life.

In today's secular society when we are invited for a celebration, the mind of many quickly think of eating and drinking with the anticipation of partying and perhaps dancing. When it comes to the church however, our celebration involves narratives of difficult situations encountered and the victories won by the victor that make the celebration sensational and inspiring to all listeners. Today, it's about Mary, the mother of our Lord.

In scripture, we are not given the family biography of Virgin Mary. What we know is her faith narrative. In Luke's gospel we learn that Mary was a young Jewish girl engaged to Joseph in Nazareth. In the midst of the marriage arrangements, an angel of the Lord appears to her saying she would be the bearer of the Son of God to the world. To this matter she answered with a yes.

She accepted angel Gabriel's word without regard for her own safety. She would have consulted Joseph her fiancée for consent, considering the cultural context that stipulated that anyone found pregnant outside marriage was to be stoned to death. Despite this dilemma, Mary overlooked the cultural barriers and was prepared to confront them no matter the implications to her life, for God's purpose to be fulfilled.

Mary's glorious moment of encounter with the messenger, may not have lasted for long. Luckily God got Joseph onboard and being a righteous servant, he was in solidarity with what was unfolding in Mary's life. Mary then follows the angel's message by visiting her elder cousin Elizabeth who was by then 6 months pregnant with John the Baptist. In her encounter with Elizabeth,

she sings her song of praise to God, the Magnificat, that we read for our psalm a few minutes ago.

The euphoria ended when Mary in her advanced stage of pregnancy, the very time when she needed more support and care, was required under the Emperor's command to travel a long distance for registration as we heard in our gospel. This was a difficult moment to undertake.

As the holy family left Nazareth for Bethlehem, God was with them. God, however, did not make the bumpy road smooth for them but instead strengthened Mary and Joseph. God did not direct the couple to a luxurious inn being royal descendants of King David but brought the birth of Mary's firstborn Son, to occur in humble surroundings.

As we always hear on Christmas day, Mary's son Jesus was born in a stable. Historically, stables were often caves with feeding troughs (mangers) carved into the rock walls – the surrounding areas being dark and dirty.

Nevertheless, Mary prioritised the safety of her baby by wrapping him in bands of cloth to keep him warm and for security reasons. Mary had to undertake all these tasks having gone through intense labour pains and was still vulnerably losing blood that accompanied a childbirth.

In the midst of this experience, shepherds arrive on the scene revealing their angelic encounter to Mary. This was a graceful moment of comfort for the holy family.

As law abiding servants, a few days later, the couple present their baby at the temple in Jerusalem during which time, Simeon prophesies to Mary about Jesus: "This child is destined for the

falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too” (Luke 2.34-35). And Mary pondered these matters in her heart.

The Magi then arrive with their gifts of high value, providing an extra comfort to Mary – what a graceful moment of realisation that God was present with them. Before long however, under the angel’s instruction, Mary and her family had to seek refuge in Egypt for the safety of her baby. The family bore the hardships of being refugees for some time.

When they returned, there were many chaotic moments that Mary being the mother of our Lord encountered which I cannot enumerate elaborately in the interest of time. They include Jesus’ public response to his family saying, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8.21).

Importantly, in every circumstance, Mary swallowed the bitter pill and welcomed in humility whatever challenges she faced. She was resilient, caring and never giving up.

As inscribed on this church’s-stained glass, Mary was present throughout Jesus’ ministry, providing and caring for him. She was present during Jesus’ trials especially at the foot of the cross when Jesus himself assigned John the beloved disciple to take care of her as narrated in John’s gospel.

Mary was present at the burial site of Jesus and was certainly present in Jesus’ resurrection appearance, although the gospel narratives generally exclude women from these important scenes. Mary was present with the disciples on the day of Pentecost as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles.

In view of Mary's life as highlighted above, we sometimes ask ourselves: I am obedient to God. Why are life situations not smooth for me? Why do I still experience discomfort or inconveniences in life? As humans we navigate ourselves to think perhaps we have misread God's will or that God has made a mistake.

But remember Mary and her family whose road from Nazareth to Bethlehem was neither made smooth nor did they experience a royal reception at the inn. Mary and her family held onto God's strength, trusting that God would provide everything they needed no matter the inconvenience or discomfort to their daily lives. The couple knew all their experiences had meaning in God's plan of salvation.

Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, encourages you and I to live each day by faith, trusting that God is in charge no matter what life presents to us, and believing that God will lead us to eternal communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for all eternity.

The Lord be with you.