

Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with you!

These words have a special place in centuries of Christian tradition. They first appear in Scripture in the Gospel of Luke, before being prayed in the prayer known as the 'Hail Mary'.

Some of us have may never have prayed this prayer, or may not have prayed this prayer since we were children. Others may pray this prayer regularly if we have a Rosary or in times of personal prayer. Here at St Peter's we often pray this prayer during Lent as we pray the Stations of the Cross.

In Scripture, the 'Hail Mary' is found on the lips of the Angel Gabriel. 'Hail Mary, full of grace'. 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women'. The 'Hail Mary' is the greeting with which Gabriel informs Mary of her role in the history of salvation.

‘Hail Mary full of grace’ might strike us a strange greeting, as strange now as it was then. It certainly seems strange to Mary. She was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Perhaps no wonder. An angelic being appears to a young woman with the news that she is to bear the child who is very God of very God, as we say in our creed. God born as one of us for all of us.

‘Hail Mary full of grace’ becomes even stranger in the Greek of Luke’s gospel. I’m not really one for using too much Greek in sermons, not least because you never know who in the congregation might know Classical Greek far better than you ever could, but it helps us to understand the greeting to notice that it is both strange and deliberately alliterative. ‘Kaire, kecharitomene’. ‘Hail, full of grace’.

The words for ‘hail’ and ‘full of grace’ are related, both from a root implying ‘joy’, and the tense of ‘full of grace’ is somewhat dulled in English - hail to the one who’s been gifted a joy in the past that continues into the present, joy to the one who’s joy flows throughout time from the past into the present. Hail, full of grace is a greeting, a cry of joy, and a reminders of God’s action throughout time and most especially in becoming one of us in the person of Jesus.

At once, the word 'hail' greets, points towards Mary, and indicates the joy that is coming into the world through her pregnancy and the child she is to bear.

We might think the name Mary is a bit simpler to understand than this interplay between 'hail' and 'full of grace' in the Angel's words. Yet here too we find a name pregnant with meaning. Mary's etymology is disputed, with various authorities tracing it through 'beloved', 'bitterness' or 'rebellion'.

Each of these captures something of the Mary we find on the pages of Scripture. Mary the one beloved of God, favoured amongst women, chosen to be the Godbearer, Mother of God, of the Word made flesh. Mary, the mother, standing at the foot of the Cross as her son is cruelly executed weeping bitter tears. Mary, the powerful image of biblical femininity, whose words in the Magnificat take up the cause of all those in rebellion against the proud, the mighty, the rich, exalting the humble, the meek, the hungry.

In these two little words, 'Hail Mary', we find so much of the message of the Gospel - a cause for joy, a greeting, a gift given in the past that continues to be given in the present, the love with which God loves us to the point of becoming one of us through Mary in Christ, the bitterness of the cross, God's intervention on behalf of the humble, the meek, the hungry and his challenge to the mighty, the proud, and the rich.

Every time we read or sing or pray the angel's words, 'Hail Mary' we point not so much to Mary but to God's action in Christ, the one who made Mary bearer of their very self into the world.

'Hail' is a greeting, a salutation, pointing out something or someone significant along the way. As we say 'Hail Mary', as we point to God's action in Mary, we say something important about the kind of people we point toward and honour in the Christian life.

We point not towards the rich and the powerful and the mighty, but the ones in whom God is already speaking and we all too easily overpower and overlook.

We make as our standard bearer of a life lived in obedience to God's promise not someone who fulfils our expectations of what such a person might be, but someone who stands with the marginalised and the overlooked in every age.

Not a mighty hero, but a trembling young woman. The young woman we greet with the angel's words 'Hail Mary', ever points us toward the action of the one whom we greet in bread and wine in a few moments.

The one who was born as one of us through Mary, and who even now is lifting up the humble, exalting the meek, filling the hungry, bringing down the mighty, humbling the proud, sending the rich empty away.

The one who sent an angel to Mary as a sign that she had been chosen to bear God into the world.

The one who we meet now in bread and wine and to whom all our Hail Mary's point. The one in whom we, like Mary, live and move and have our being. God who through Mary comes into the world, and who now through bread and wine comes into our hearts and sends us out like Mary to point to him in all we think and say and do. Amen.