

Have you ever had a birthday or Christmas present, or a prize possession, that you've broken or spoiled? It is brand-new, your pride and joy; then you drop it, or spill something over it. The smashed phone screen, the pages of a tea-stained book tell the story; for car drivers, the dent in your shiny new car. I have an armless mini-statue of St Benedict that came to harm at the chess club some years ago. Not to mention the brand-new sacristy carpet someone dropped burning charcoal on as a teenager 30 years ago. Yes, me.

That feeling – the moment you realise something beautiful has been spoiled – is exactly the feeling that runs through the first pages of the Bible. Only one chapter earlier, in Genesis chapter 2, God has beautifully finished the world. Adam and Eve, his greatest creation, are given paradise to live in. Trust is complete. Friendship with God is open and unbroken. Then, almost immediately, by the start of Genesis chapter 3, everything begins to fray. Human beings step away from that trust and that friendship by listening to a wicked voice. While the first two chapters of the Bible tell the story of creation, the other 1,300 chapters tell the long aftermath – God's patient work of saving us.

After the fall of Eve and Adam, God speaks his first recorded question. We heard it in our first reading. He calls to Adam and says: *Where are you?* The question of a Father searching for his children. A question still being asked, in every human heart. And today, that question leads us to a young woman in Nazareth.

Mary of Nazareth is the greatest saint ever to be born. Think of the Hail Mary and how much praise is gathered into that one prayer: full of grace; the Lord is with you; blessed among women; blessed is the fruit of your womb; holy Mary. Think of the Angelus we pray in our tutor groups each day: *behold, the handmaid of the Lord.*

Mary of Nazareth was the greatest disciple in history. We remember other great saints as a school – Benedict, Gregory, Barlow, Roberts, in some years Peter and Paul. All of them are towering figures. And yet, all of them are exceeded by one woman, whose greatness begins quietly, in her willingness to answer God's invitation with her whole life.

The second reading puts simple words around something very big. St Paul says that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Before sin, before the world became complicated and people learned how to hurt one another, God already had a purpose for our

life. The purpose was to live in God's loving presence. From before Mary's first breath, she lived as God had intended from all eternity; to be close to God, alive with trust.

The first story of Mary that we know of was our gospel today. We say it in the Angelus all the time; the Angel of the Lord entered the room in Nazareth and spoke to her. A crucial moment for our broken world. Mary did not have to say yes; although she was spared original sin, the freedom of her decision was as perfect as human freedom can be; because Mary was not tainted by sin. Freedom is not doing what you want; it is doing what God made you for. Whilst some parents have ambitions for us, Our Lord knows us better than anyone, he knows what will make us fully alive. Careers guidance is offered in this School; but God's guidance, through prayer and holy living, will help us *be made worthy of the promises of Christ*.

Our School places Christ at the Centre; but without Mary's decision to help God's plan, Jesus would not have been born at the first Christmas. For 1000 years God had already been laying the groundwork through Abraham, Moses, Jesse, King David and so on. The decision to help God in realising his plan was placed in her hands. The greatest cliffhanger moment in all of human history was when the angel Gabriel waited for her response. Her decision; would she be willing to be Mother of God, Mother of our incarnate Lord. One of the great teachers of the Church, St Bernard, imagined that moment by saying that the whole of creation leaned forward and waited – the angels in heaven, the earth below after long centuries of longing – everything and everyone holding its breath for Mary's reply. The whole story balances on a single human answer. What will Mary say?

And Mary answered: *I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word*. With her yes, the long work of redemption was able to begin. *Hail, Mother of the Redeemer. Hail Mary, full of grace*. Thank you Mary, for the gift of Christmas, when you gave your consent to bring to birth Jesus, Son of the Most High.

Dear brothers and sisters, if anything about our school is ever to make sense, then this hour of stopping, listening, and reflecting truly matters. True human freedom is shown to us in Mary. Here are seven pieces of advice: Love her. Stay close to her. Ask her prayers. Learn from her trust. Think of her as your mother and mine. Remember her birthday, nine months from now. Give her gifts through your flourishing. Hail, our life, our sweetness, and our hope. *Hail Mary!*