

There was a time when 'Top Gear' was all the rage in our house. I can't remember who was the greatest fan of the car-loving trio of Jeremy Clarkson, Richard Hammond and James May, but their various scrapes with cars of various shapes and sizes – in any number of different venues – kept us amused for some while.

So when I heard James May being interviewed on the radio yesterday about 'laddishness', I took more than a passing interest. His point (somewhat open to question I thought) was that the current understanding of 'maleness' today involves men being both macho and a bit thick; as a species we are apparently pretty uninterested in the finer things of life and all the more subtle and intelligent characteristics of human existence are only likely to be found in men when they are attending to the more 'feminine side' of their personalities.

I think this could be a pretty interesting topic for our coffee break after Mass and of course I was pretty fired up with counter arguments as I drank my first coffee of the morning - until I heard a female commentator lambasting the (almost completely) male politicians for their recent failure to realise the potential that could have emerged from the Climate Change talks in Copenhagen. Apparently the whole thing was a procedural nightmare as one macho leader after another tried to find ways of tying the discussions in knots to avoid being seen to be weak for his audience back home. Not surprisingly, the commentator implied, loftily, that had it been left to a group of women, a more complex and much fairer result would have emerged – and in half the time.

Is she right; is James May on to something? I am tempted to say, probably not: all these gross simplifications and generalisations tend to be pretty useless, but it sharpens the context for Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who is the theme for our last Sunday in Advent.

Let's start with what we might call her. Do you call her just Mary; or Mary the Mother of Our Lord; or Our Lady, the most familiar term among Roman Catholics or, as most Anglican texts describe her, as the Blessed Virgin Mary – with the emphasis on the word Virgin?

Like 'laddish', the word virgin is strongly stereo-typical. In many parts of the Christian tradition it is a highly prized accolade, denoting someone who has given up everything for God, for example when nuns make their life vows they are described as 'brides of Christ'. St Paul appeared to believe that chastity and virginity were marks of a higher degree of faith – and his position on sexual abstinence is still used as the justification for denying marriage to Roman Catholic clergy.

And yet the truth is that in the Old Testament, and still among much of the Jewish community, virginity was thought to be a bad thing, a negative characteristic – useless, despised and pointless. When God describes Israel as a virgin he is not praising her but noting that she does not produce anything worthwhile, is lifeless and barren. She is described as being like a desert. In the Gospels, Mary's cousin Elizabeth is miraculously released – in advanced old age - from this dreadful shame of being unable to produce a child.

So why do we make such a fuss of "Mary ever Virgin" (despite the difficulties with the story about Jesus' mother bringing his brothers and sisters to see him) or continue to describe her as the Blessed Virgin Mary?

There is no doubt that St Pauls' legacy lives on, that the gift of sublimating our sexual potential is the gift that God would most honour. And yet St Luke is telling us something so much more revolutionary and exciting. What he tells us is that Mary's virgin status is rather like the social status of the smelly shepherds or the tumble-down stable: they are precisely the wrong people and the wrong places to welcome the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! As Herod said later, surely one such as he would be born in a palace – and to people who were themselves born to these things. What right did a scruffy child, still a virgin, and a lot of no-hopers from off the fields, have to witness such an event otherwise denied to their betters?

It was about qualifications, then as now: about class and appropriate behaviour.

And St Luke will have none of it: Mary can be thought of as Queen of Heaven in the topsy-turvy world where nothing is as it should be. So her hymn of praise – after the angel has told her of how God has

chosen her to be the mother of Jesus – is full of the most revolutionary lines: *he has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things – and the rich he has sent empty away.*

Is it any wonder that, in the early days of the 19th century, when the East India company ruled much of the subcontinent, they forbade the saying of the words of the Magnificat at Evensong, in case the sepoys got the wrong idea?!

And the truth of Advent, this journey of discovery of which we spoke a month ago as we lit our first candle, is just that simple and that commonplace – for we say the words of the Magnificat almost every day in Evening Prayer: it is part of the bedrock of our prayer life.

So this is not a fresh revelation but a call to discover anew what we have already been told: that the prophets and the wise men and women of the past have not just been pointing us to the birth of Jesus as an epoch making event which may or may not touch us – like men landing on the moon. It is much more radical than that. They warn us that the birth of Jesus must, if it is to be acknowledged at all, turn everything we know (or think we know) upside down: money, power, social relationships. Our attitudes and ways of being are all held up to the same scrutiny: *he has shown the strength of his arm, and has scattered the proud in their conceit.*

Which is why the second level of our Advent journey here at St James' has been a re-examination of St Paul's invitation (from I Corinthians 13) to strive for the spiritual gifts of Hope, Faith and love – or better, charity. Fiona and Fr Victor have briefly touched on the first two, but in company with Mary, the Virgin mother of Jesus, we ask today: is it not charity which is the gift we most need in our world today?

And by charity I don't mean that rather mean-spirited giving to the poor which reduces our sharing of our resources to the handing over of the leftovers of what we can afford. No, I mean that much more fundamental attitude of mind which gives the benefit of the doubt, walks the extra mile, which truly places the other person first, which does not take offence or count the list of wrongs, which smiles under persecution and flowers under misunderstanding; the gift which

radiates a generosity of spirit which was, of course, the Virgin Mary's natural instinct?

If we are willing to stand in the shoes of Mary (assuming she had any!) and can freely open our hands to all-comers, without strings or restraint, will we not also find the words of the Magnificat coming alive within us too: *He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy – the promise he made to our forebears, to Abraham and to his children for ever?*

In other words, as we learn to give as wholeheartedly as Mary, the despised and side-lined virgin, so God tells us that we will receive all that was promised to us from the very beginning of time: God will remember us too and lift us up just like he lifted this slip of a girl to be *theotokos*, the God bearer.

All we have to do, to inherit this great gift, is to be humble of heart and givers of charity – that radical upside down way of behaving which lifts up the meek and the lowly in place of the rich and the proud.

And how much our world needs such a revolution this Christmas, a change of heart that will make the dead come alive, the poor rejoice, the lonely feel loved and the outcast in every situation flourish. As Isaiah once said, then shall the barren desert bloom.

Some would say that perhaps St James' should be saying good riddance to 2009: that lots of things have been unspeakably difficult and we need to move on.

Possibly it is otherwise: that we have needed this year – all of us – to recall the very centre of our Christian faith. We have needed some time in the wilderness to see again the radical message of Christ and our status as virgins. Perhaps we are stronger for having tasted our poverty in the face of his unspeakable glory.

If so, may our Christmas be the time when, with Mary, we say *The Almighty has done great things for me: and holy is his name.*

God tests those he loves, and he will no more fail us than he failed the Virgin whom he would transform into the greatest mother that ever lived. For sure he will never write any of us off – but he will be re-defining the way we look at one another – laddish or not!