

In our collect we prayed:

God our redeemer,
who *prepared* the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:

On the face of it, the collect is rather disingenuous in its description of Mary's being *prepared* to be the mother of God's son: Luke tells of an angel dropping in unannounced with the news, and her understandable response of perplexity and fear. Some preparation, we might say.

Gabriel's speech to Mary is quite long, so here's the Executive Summary;

- Don't be afraid
- You're going to have a baby
- He'll be the Son of God

Of course we remember that last point in particular, it's what Christmas is all about. But Mary was so poleaxed by the previous thunderbolt she couldn't take in the theology which came after it.

She was going to have a baby.

She could see her world falling apart. Mothers of illegitimate children in those days could be stoned to death. Joseph would certainly end the engagement. She'll become a social outcast and will end up begging or in prostitution.

No wonder she argues, seeking clarification. But then she shows all the hallmarks of being a very faithful young Jewish woman, as well as a very brave one. As such, her preparation would have gone back to her childhood, when she was steeped in the stories of her heritage, and, before her birth, to the heritage itself, with its sometimes turbulent relationship with God and the passionate yearnings for God to come as Saviour. God's response to that yearning — one that, time and again, we are told that God shares — had been to remind the Jewish people that coming to save meant also coming to judge them, holding them to their calling to be the people of God, through whom all nations would be blessed.

This is the inheritance that prepared Mary for the sudden visit of the angel, and for her readiness to greet him once the initial shock was over. In these last days of Advent, we can ask ourselves how secure we are in our Christian heritage: if an angel dropped in on us, would we have the spiritual wherewithal to make sense of what God is asking of us?

The collect continues:

grant that, as she (Mary) looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge;

If we are faithful to the response of Mary to the angel's announcement, our prayer today is answered not so much by gearing ourselves up spiritually to be ready for some future cataclysmic event, when Christ comes again to judge the world, but by our day-in, day-out preparation to meet him through our routine faithful living.

If we are not making the effort to prepare for God's coming among us in our ordinary life, and cannot trace his presence with us now, we have missed the point. This Advent prayer is answered by our commitment to seeking God in the ordinary rather than the spectacular. Our response when God acts dramatically will be determined by our fidelity now.