

Voices Through Time The Prophet

There are days when I want to scream at the world from the rooftops and there are days when I could stay in bed and pretend that the world outside doesn't exist. I look around and see everything falling apart and the worst of it is that no one else can see it.

But I can. I can see everything that's wrong, and I can see where we are heading, but I might as well have been talking to a brick wall.

And there's one common denominator in all the world's mess: humans. My God, the things I've seen humans do to one another.

I've seen tribe rise up against tribe and go to war with each other; I've sat at tables and watched rich people stuff their faces full of food whilst others begged, right outside the gates of their house; I've seen the outsider spat on for not being from around these parts; I've witnessed the sick and disabled beg for help as everyone just walked by.

And the religious types. Oh the religious types. They waft around in their fine robes, noses high in the air. They find the splinter in everyone else's eye when they can't see the plank of wood in their own. They keep the "right" sort of people in and the "wrong" sort of people out; they sell God's forgiveness to the highest bidder. They're the worst.

The thing is that when I look underneath the mess, I see so much potential, so much of what that the world could be. I see those at war taking a hammer to their swords and beating them into farming tools; I see people of different tribes talking no longer of the "other" and only of "sister and brother"; I see, and call me mad if you like, wolves living with lambs and calves leaping with the lions and a little child playing amongst them.

I see a world that's literally pregnant with God.

That's what I remember, that's what I hold onto on the days when I want to scream at the world from the rooftops or stay in bed and pretend that the world outside doesn't exist.

One day it will change. It has to. But God knows we can't do it ourselves; we need someone to show us how bad things are and how wonderful things can be.

We need a Wonderful Counsellor, a Mighty God, an Everlasting Father, a Prince of Peace.

We need a Saviour.

Voices Through Time

Mary

Of course, I was nervous, well honestly, terrified! What if he was unkind? What if we never loved each other? I had always known that an arranged marriage was on the cards but then it became a reality and I was scared.

I remember the first time we met, there was a gentleness in his voice and a kindness in his eyes. Of course, you could have cut the atmosphere with a knife, awkward doesn't come close, but as we talked, I realised that this man, this Joseph was a good man...perhaps a man that I could even grow to love. I remember he said to me, 'I promise to care for you.' I think I believed him.

It was all going so well, Joseph had started to build the house and we were spending lots of time together. I found myself growing closer to him and dared to think that this might work. Then it all went horribly wrong.

I couldn't sleep one evening, so I stepped outside for some fresh air. I could see a man across the road, so I turned to go back inside: 'You never know', I thought. But he called my name. He said his name was Gabriel and he wanted to talk. We chatted generally at first, but the conversation changed and he began to say things that only those closest to me would know. It was as if he had seen my every thought, he told me things that no one knew and it was scaring me. And then he said it, said just a few words that would change everything. 'You're going to have a baby. You should call him Jesus and he will be God's Son.' 'I was right! Lunatic!' I thought, and left. But I still couldn't sleep and I couldn't help thinking how he knew all of those things.

I tried to put it to the back of my mind, but something wasn't right. Then I started to put on weight. 'It's contentment! Life with Joseph must be going well!' my father would say, but I knew what it was. More people began to notice and I knew I had to tell Joseph what had happened.

It took me a few days to pluck up the courage and I am sure you can imagine his reaction when I did. He must have thought I was playing him for a fool, all this talk About God's baby. He shouted a lot, said something about betrayal after all he had done. I can't really remember much about it, my head was spinning. He had a point though, even I felt I had betrayed him and I knew the truth!

'Such a good girl, Mary!' they used to say when I was little. Not now. Now there are hushed whispers whenever I pass by and some people aren't that subtle: 'You're a tart!' they should shout. This wasn't how Gabriel said it would be.

Joseph was kind given the circumstances. I could have been stoned to death and I constantly feared it. He said he would take me to Bethlehem for the census then we would go our separate ways. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised, but half of me constantly hoped that he would stay with me. What was I going to do on my own? My family weren't talking to me, I wasn't allowed in the Temple and I had nowhere to go.

Well, we travelled to Bethlehem. It was a horrible journey, not just because of the terrain. Joseph didn't breathe a word to me. I wouldn't mind if he had been angry but he looked hurt, really hurt. He had been so kind to me.

We eventually arrived at Bethlehem, but we couldn't find anywhere to stay: it was packed with people visiting for the census and then with one last stroke of bad timing, I went into labour. Thankfully, one inn keeper allowed us to use his out-building and his wife was good to us; she gave us blankets and helped build a fire. As the pain got worse, Joseph

left, I think he was outside. Well the baby came, little Jesus, and I couldn't help but love him from the second I saw him. My son. Joseph eventually came in, to say his goodbyes, I thought, but then he spoke these words to me: 'I don't know how yet but we will work through this.'

[*Pause*]

'You grow up too fast!' my mother used to say to me. Now I know what she meant. He is so clever, his knowledge of the scriptures is better than mine and Joseph's put together; he even has the Rabbi lost for words at times! He is growing strong too, probably because he helps his father so much in the workshop. I can't wait to see him grow up; I know he'll go far.

Voices Through Time Joseph

I remember when we first met, thinking how beautiful she was. I knew it wasn't easy for her and I think she found it difficult in the first few weeks. Well, how would you feel, being told who you were going to marry, having never met them? I started building the house and it was going well; we were spending lots of time together and I think she was beginning to really like me. I tried to impress her, of course, telling my rubbish jokes and she laughed with affection and sincerity. She made me behave differently, I would lose myself when we were together and I fell in love with her. What I wanted more than anything was for her to feel the same.

Then, one evening she said that she had something to tell me. She said she was pregnant. It was as if I had fallen from a very great height, you know that plunging feeling you get in your stomach? Then I just went numb. She had betrayed me. I wanted her to say that she was only joking but I could tell that she wasn't. She talked some nonsense about a visit from this man, she said something about God's baby and we had been chosen. What did she think I was, an idiot? I was amazed at the time that she thought I might even buy it! If it wasn't happening to me, I would have found it almost funny. But it wasn't funny, because it *was* real and it *was* happening to me.

But in spite of all this, and I can't believe I'm saying this, I still care for her, I suppose that's what makes it a million times worse. I couldn't stand to look at her because it hurt so much. I thought she was beginning to really like me, but I was obviously wrong.

We had to go to Bethlehem for the census. Perfect timing! The last thing I wanted was to be alone with her on a long journey, so I thought that once we were there, I could leave her, at least that way, she would be spared the shame and me the pity. The pity was unbearable, 'poor Joseph,' people would say. I didn't want pity, I was raw with anger.

Getting to sleep on the journey to Bethlehem was pretty impossible and when I did sleep, it was restless and every time I closed my eyes, I kept replaying the night when she told me she was pregnant. It was when I was having one of these moments that something different happened. As usual, I was replaying the conversation in my head but this time, there was a third voice getting louder over the top yelling, 'She's telling the truth,' it kept saying, 'She's telling the truth.' Wishful thinking, I supposed, but I desperately wanted to believe it was true. Well the rest of the journey was as hellish as the first part. Mary kept trying to make eye contact, but I couldn't bear to look at her because every time I did, I thought I might forgive her and there was no way that was going to happen.

Then, with one last piece of comical timing, she went into labour not long after we arrived in Bethlehem. I couldn't stand it, the cries of pain and the fact that she was giving birth to a child that wasn't mine, it was all too much. I went outside and wondered whether this was the time for me to walk away. It would have been so easy just to walk down the road, away from Mary and leave it all behind, start afresh. Then she screamed in pain and it was my name she called, my name.

I don't know what made me do it, I suppose that when the pressure is on, you sort of get a clarity of thinking and in a moment of pure clarity, I decided. I decided that this was going to work, that we would make something of this mess and have a life together. 'Why?' you might ask and you'd be right to ask. Because I care for her and *our* son.

Voices Through Time Thomas the Shepherd

Life was pretty rubbish at the time to say the least. I was behind with my taxes and I wasn't going to get away with it for much longer, meaning that a hefty beating was coming my way and I risked losing everything. I felt inadequate; I had a wife and a daughter and I couldn't provide for them on the pittance I made in the fields.

Rabbi kept telling me to be strong and hold on, that the Saviour was coming and all would be well. Easy for him to say in his fine robes and warm house. I often wondered if he really believed it or just kept saying it to shut me up. Everyone seemed to be at it, all over town there were men saying that the Saviour was coming. 'Well he'd better hurry up,' I thought, 'Because my taxes are due next week so if he doesn't arrive by Tuesday, then I'm done for!'

It was a night like most others, though we had let our guard down a little because there was a clear sky, so we could see more with the light of the moon. It would be less likely that thieves would take the sheep, which meant we only had to worry about attacks from wolves. We made a fire and took our minds off quite how bad life was for all of us by telling the usual jokes and stories. We talked about faith and the others tried to convince me that the promised Saviour was coming. They did this most nights, but I was losing faith. I couldn't help but pity their sweet romantic ideas, when life was so awful. But, if it helped them get through each day, then it couldn't do any harm, I thought.

Then I saw them on the top of the hill, men coming towards us. I knew who they were - thieves. I reached down for my knife. Something wasn't right though, they didn't seem confrontational, they didn't have weapons or anything. They were out of breath when they got to us and they spoke in a mix of panic and excitement. 'He's here!' they said, 'He's here!' 'Oh God,' I thought, 'The owner of the sheep, my boss has come to check on us.' 'The Saviour's arrived, in an out-building on the edge of town.'

The whole world had gone mad! They must have been completely drunk out their minds, to spout this rubbish this late at night! Well, blow me down, the other guys softened and were talking about going to see. The whole world had lost its marbles and I was the only sane one left. Leaving the sheep was suicide - they didn't belong to us, so to lose them would mean losing our jobs at the least and probably our homes. They had made their minds up though and they were going to see. I followed them trying to convince them to stay but they wouldn't have it.

Before we knew it, we were in town. The closer we got to the place, the more suspicious I became: we went down back roads and alley ways until we got to this crummy looking shed. I was certain - these blokes were having us on and we had left the sheep for this. I only hoped that they were still there when we got back. 'This is ridiculous, I'm off,' I said. Then I heard crying, a baby crying. We went in and there they were, mum, dad and baby. Dad got a bit defensive but we told him what had happened and it was as if he knew what we were talking about, so he let his guard down.

It was weird, everyone there seemed to know what was happening, as if they were in on a secret - they kept giving each other knowing looks.

I had heard the promise so many times before, 'Don't worry, the Saviour is coming!' This time I really wanted to believe it.