

A much-loved trilogy was to inspire one of the more eclectic and loveable television series to come out of Aunty BBC for some time. Known as the Midwife Trilogy, nurse Jenny Worth's reflection of her time working in the East End of London as a midwife brought back into the popular lexicon the phrase "Call the midwife!"

It dealt with a time when an ambulance was the last resort; the doctor only came if there was a problem – a breach or forceps delivery required, but as it was for centuries and centuries, the midwife was the person who was in charge. Clearing the house of men or putting them to unessential but time-consuming tasks was considered normal. "Boil some water!" "Get some towels." It's a far cry from today's insisting that the father is present and part of the entire process of giving birth.

In the Christmas special coming up, and yes, this is a 'spoiler', Santa arrives not on a sleigh, but a sledge. I knew there was a good reason to keep our cricketers around! Instead of reindeer, he is pulled by space elves, whom one of the sisters mistakes them as painted pixies! And there, on the steps of Nonnatus House are the sisters and midwives, excited by the season. I love the catchphrase that is used for the episode: "We have lift off!"

In Pascoe Vale, to call the midwife in the 1950s was an art form. It used to be known as the 'country' because it was so far out of the city. Phones were scarce. Down on Bell Street, there was a midwife. An ingenious code was developed. A red towel on the clothesline meant a midwife was required. This was then repeated all the way down Cumberland Road and into Bell Street. The midwife would then follow the line of towels until she found the place where the baby was to be born.

In two (three) days-time, we have lift off! Yes, it's Christmas time, and it is about to be that time when someone in Bethlehem will shout out "Call the midwife!" as Mary begins the labour of bringing into the world the Promised One, the Messiah, the Saviour of the World. I wonder if Joseph was banished from the stable?

In the gospel today, we encounter the lift off in Elizabeth's womb as the unborn Baptist responds to the voice of Mary, "the mother of my Lord". The song that follows, which we have already heard in part from Hannah on the second Sunday of Advent pours out the joy that Mary has. She finds Elizabeth in her third trimester. She affirms for herself what the angel Gabriel had said, and conscious of her fiat, her saying yes to God, her soul bursts out in song.

A small sentence oft overlooked is this: and Mary stayed there for about three months before returning home. (Luke 1.56) This put Mary in the house of Elizabeth around the time of the birth of John, and it would be reasonable to assume that she indeed was one of the midwives present at the birth.

It is in the passages of the Annunciation and Visitation that we get one of the oldest and much loved, and I must admit, often maligned prayers of our faith journey. The Ave Maria or Hail Mary is often mistaken as being a prayer to Mary. Such a thing is thoroughly un-Anglican, to be blunt, misguided. Throughout our Anglican liturgy, as it was with earlier Roman and Greek Orthodox liturgy, the quoting of scripture as a means to enable prayer, devotion and reflection was the norm.

In the days before the printing press revolutionised the word in the 15th century, it was through constant repetition that the faith was passed on.

Deep in our own Anglican psyche, the office of Evensong draws on the monastic tradition of chanting the scripture and psalms as a way of helping us move from focussing on our everyday thoughts to being in an intentional and directed prayer space. Our liturgy is nearly all assembled from words in the Hebrew and New Testaments.

If I were to chant “O Lord, open thou our lips” many of you would rightly respond “and our mouths shall shew forth thy praise”. “We are not worthy so much as to...gather the crumbs under thy table.” “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word, and I shall be healed”. All scriptural. All meaningful. All taking us to other places beyond ourselves. It is in these words that something else is brought to life, and we, act as a midwife to the new life that they carry.

The prayer of Mary begins by quoting the angel Gabriel. The next line quotes Elizabeth. And we’re still in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. The next line jumps forward a couple of hundred years to the Council of Nicaea and the creedal formula that we know so well. [Holy] Mary, Mother of God. The holy is an adjective describing Mary’s chosen nation: sanctified. Mother of God is translated in Greek as Theotokos: the one who bears God. Again, totally orthodox.

The next line that raises the odd eyebrow or three: pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. This line is quite late, formally added at the Council of Trent in the 16th century. It became a point of contention between the Reformed, the Protestant and Orthodox churches. Lately, some Anglicans, mainly influenced by our contemplative Franciscans, pray this instead: "Son of Mary, Son of the Living God, Have mercy upon us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." I will also admit to having some difficulty with this on a logical point of view: looking at Romans 6.2, if through baptism I have died to sin but am alive as reckoned in Christ, then I question the need for the petition or prayer at all.

But before you think that I’m in a head spin and about to achieve liftoff, that’s okay. What did Mary do? She let her soul pour forth praise! When Jesus, later in life, was reckoned as being rude about Mary, his reply underpinned the importance of the one who brought into the world the Saviour, the very WORD MADE FLESH. In responding to “Blessed are the paps that suckled you” Jesus said, “No, rather, blessed are those who hear the word of the Lord and keep it.” Mary received the news of Gabriel, saw for herself in Elizabeth that for God, all things were possible, and reflecting on her agreeing to “Let this be done to me according to God’s word” her soul overflowed with joy.

All of us, like Mary, are called to be midwives to the Word of God becoming flesh and dwelling with us, in us and through us. We are the ones who in this day and age are called to bring to life that beautiful things that God has done. It is in the joy of Mary that we can find inspiration. In the receiving of the Word of God, and allowing that to inspire, inform and shape me, there can be found much freedom and contentment.

Some may need beads and formulas to help them count the joys of God, but this Christmas, my prayer and hope are that you just let the joy of God overflow into your hearts as you bring into the world the beautiful things that not only God has done but is continuing to do in our lives.

Let your soul grow in praise and may you too rejoice in God our Saviour.