In the build up to Christmas at Westlake we've been looking at the women who appear in Jesus' genealogy. Because in a list of fathers and sons, 5 women who appear. Which begs the question, why those women? And investigate their stories, and you discover they're not the kind of stories most families would highlight. Because the first four women are all of dubious background or questionable character. Tamar's abused. Rahab's a foreign prostitute. Ruth's an ethnic outcast and Bathsheba, who was beautiful, was also another man's wife.

But all that tells us, that it's into the brokenness and beauty of the world, that Christ came that first Christmas.

But it leaves us with the last woman - Mary. And it'd be tempting to say, 'doh, it's obvious why she's included, she's Jesus' mother!' Sure, but the geneaology is a list of fathers. So why name her? And underlying that question's another, why does God choose her?

I became a Christian when I was about 17 and shortly after I heard a minister ask just that question, and it stuck with me: why did God choose Mary? And his point was, there must have been something, something attractive about her that made God pick her.

So what was it? Did she have good cheek bone structure? Was God flicking through a catalogue of potential surrogate mothers and it was the colour of her eyes, or quality of her smile that did it? Or her IQ, or risk of disease profile, or her character that made her stand out?

Well, look what the angel says to her, "Greetings, O favoured one!" (Luke 1:28) Not, 'Greetings, O most deserving' or 'most attractive one.' And later on, he says, "you have found favour with God" (Luke 1:30). And both times, that word *favour* is the word for grace or gift. So while a teacher might have a favourite pupil because they behave well, and a sports fan might have a favourite player because they perform well. Here, God isn't playing favourites with Mary, he's showing grace.

Because what's striking about Mary is not how exceptional she was, but how ordinary - even less than ordinary - she was. And not in a way that empties Christmas of its wonder but multiplies it.

You see, did you notice where she comes from? 'The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city *of Galilee* named Nazareth' (Luke1:26) - or as we heard in one of the readings, Galilee 'of the nations', Galilee despised by the rest of Israel as the place where Jews had intermarried with pagan gentiles.

But even Galileans need someone to look down on, don't they? And who was that? Nazareth. Like when one of the twelve disciples introduced a friend to Jesus *of Nazareth*, but the retort came back: '*Nazareth!?* Can anything good come out of *Nazareth*?'

So Mary's growing up on the wrong side of the tracks - the kind of place people want to leave not visit.

And she has no illusions about her social standing. In her famous song, *The Magnificat*, she doesn't sing 'how lucky God is to have found beautiful, intelligent, articulate me.' Instead, she says he has 'exalted those *of humble estate*' (v52) and 'filled *the hungry* with good things' (v53).

So it's not just that Mary was young and female, it's that she was poor and from the wrong part of town, and probably knew what it was to go hungry, at a time when age and sex and wealth and social standing were *the* signs of God's blessing.

But all is not lost for Mary, is it? Maybe she can marry up! Because she was 'betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David' (v27). King David. The royal family of Judah. So we are going to witness a royal wedding!

Except the house of David has long fallen on hard times. And if we all love a good rags to riches story, the house of David is a story of riches to rags. And Joseph is no crown prince, he's a carpenter. And there's not been a king on David's throne for 500 years.

So, you know how organisations like the UN enlist the rich and famous to be their goodwill ambassadors? No one would have come knocking on Mary's door, would they? And of all the things we typically assess people by: their wealth, education, social capital, networks of influence, Mary had none of them.

And yet, God chose her.

But there's another reason she stands out, isn't there. The angel tells her she's going to bear a son and she replies, "How will this be, *since I am a virgin*?" (v34). So, if all the other women in Jesus' genealogy are of questionable character, Mary's no different, is she? At least not in the sight of her neighbours. Because Mary may be young, but she's not naive, is she? She knows where babies come from, and so does everyone else. And she's going to face the social stigma of that.

So it's not just that Mary's poor, and from the backwoods, it's that she's a virgin - chosen to carry a son.

And listen again to how the angel describes him: his name will be Jesus, he will be great, Son of the Most High, heir to the throne of David, ruling forever over a kingdom that will never end, the Son of God.

And so the wonder of Christmas is not just that God in his grace chooses Mary *of Nazareth*, it's that God the Son takes on our humanity in her womb. That in the words of the carol: 'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity.'

And what's remarkable is that Mary says 'yes' to all this: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to be according to your word" (v38). Because the stigma and the cost are not what this girl from the wrong side of the tracks is thinking of, is it? It's that God in his grace would choose *her*.

And it's that saying 'yes' that secures Mary's place in the greatest of all family trees.

And that's what's extraordinary about Christmas, isn't it? Because we're all invited to find our place in the same family. You see if Mary is a recipient of God's undeserved love - that same love is on offer to us. Because if Mary was of no social capital, think how much lower her son went.

You see, at his incarnation Jesus entered the darkness of her womb, but at the cross he enters the darkness of sin and death. At his birth, he was born naked, then wrapped in swaddling cloths and

laid in a borrowed manger, but at the cross he was stripped naked and at his death wrapped in grave cloths and laid in a borrowed tomb. And why, beginning with Nazareth, does he stoop so low? Why become so poor? To lift us up and make us rich. Rich with his love and grace and mercy and forgiveness.

You see, if the angel greets Mary and says, “The Lord is with you” - the wonder of Christmas is that the same can be said of us.

But like Mary, you’ve got to be willing to say ‘yes' to him. Like her we need to realise our poverty but then be open to receiving the greatest of gifts: the one who fills the hungry and lifts up the humble.

So this Christmas - however ordinary, or not, you are, consider Mary. But more than Mary, consider her Son - Jesus *of Nazareth*. And say yes to him like Mary did.