That daring young woman

 That daring young woman Mary is often thought by contemporary writers to be pliant and submissive to God, writes Sally Read. But from the start of her pregnancy, she showed courage akin to a tightrope walker. Perhaps it is impossible to imagine how it would feel to be carrying the Son of God as a pregnant virgin. After the Magnificat, Scripture tells us nothing of Mary's feelings about her new state. But this pregnancy, I would argue, is the über-gestation: it magnifies not only the Lord, but the fear, power and wonder of any pregnancy. Seen in this light, the insipid figure in so many Annunciations, the cleaned-up mother in the Christmas cards, is revealed as a woman of dizzying strength.

There is, of course, a jubilant certainty, in the Magnificat: Mary seems to have come

through being "greatly troubled", and seems set to bloom in great contentment. But surely it wasn't that simple. In the first trimester, any woman is acutely aware of a life unfurling inside her – yet, more often than not, the signs of pregnancy seem inconclusive. More than one mother has told me they half-expected the first scan to reveal an empty womb: they must have made it up! Could any mortal in Mary's position not have wondered if they'd got

it wrong?

The wonderings of pregnancy don't end

there. Will we miscarry? Is it a boy or a girl? Is it healthy? All mothers sense that the future is taken out of their hands – but none so much as Mary. After hearing an angel, it must have seemed as though anything could happen (and, indeed, it did). The psychological tension this could have provoked seems

more than anyone could bear. Mary may have gone to Elizabeth to help her in the last part of her own pregnancy. But she may also have gone to her for support, and to pray together through those quietest and most obscure first weeks. This may have been the truest dark night: apparent silence from God when he was closest. The

unique pitch of Mary's uncertainty had to

be matched by the deepest communion.

Only faith could hush the terrifying array

of possibilities, as an imperceptible Christ

swam in her.

We can't know if Mary was fortified, then, by the foetus' growth. Women often bond with a baby when they feel his or her

movements. There develops a rightness

that eclipses blood-test results or financial

worries. We can't know if Mary's cargo

gave her this sense of rightness – or an

increase of awe.

We do know her stomach, pelvis and

liver squashed and shifted like anyone's, to make space for this unknown. This is the Incarnation's poetry: Mary lived physically what we strive for spiritually –

transformation, as Christ forms within us.

But this internalisation of Christ asks of us,

as well as gives, and it certainly asked of

Mary. Her swollen belly would have been the subject of gossip. Add to that her

ignorance as to what, exactly, she would produce, and it's clear she could only carry on with a constant renewal of her fiat. The fiat wasn't a one-off declaration. It had to strengthen itself with the

growing body of God himself. Ambivalence could have led to what we would now call a breakdown.

Every pregnancy leaves us vulnerable: we are about to unleash something over which we have little control. Mary’s

pregnancy was the acme of this. But let’s not kid ourselves: every pregnancy asks a fiat of every woman – we know this because women and babies are damaged or destroyed every day by its lack.

Modern women can often mistake Mary’s submission for weakness. In fact, her life is a courageous, quietly hair-raising navigation of God’s will. As Sylvia Plath says in her poem for three voices about motherhood, we crave normality in our children – isolation, eccentricity and rebellion all break a mother’s heart. Mary knew too well the tremendous discomfort of difference, and its agonising finale. Her earthly walk through maternity has the breathtaking dare of a tightrope walker, never taking her eyes from God.

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