About a hundred years after the time of Daniel and Ezekiel, the people returned to live in their own land. They settled in towns and villages and rebuilt Jerusalem. But although they were not living in Babylon, they were still not free to live their lives as they wanted. More powerful countries kept invading Israel and taking charge of it. After another 400 years, the Romans came, invaded the land and took control. There was a Roman governor in charge of each area of the country, and there were Roman soldiers everywhere.

In a small town called Nazareth there lived a young girl called Mary. Her family were careful to keep the law, but life was hard. They had to pay Roman taxes and cope with Roman laws. They had no leaders or prophets among their own people, and they all dreamed of the day when God would send someone to help them. Mary's father often told her of the promised Messiah—a leader chosen by God who would be both a prophet and their new king. ‘Perhaps he will lead an army to fight the Romans,’ her father said, ‘and send them out of our land so that we can be free once more.’ Mary often used to pray that the promised Messiah would come, but she had never dreamed of what would happen next.

One day Mary was alone in the house. Suddenly the shadows filled with light and the whole room felt different. Mary looked round and saw a figure standing in the doorway. The figure looked like a man, but there was something mysterious about him. Mary had the feeling that the figure had come from the very presence of God—that there was something deep and holy and different about him. She felt afraid. The figure spoke: ‘Greetings, favoured one. The Lord is with you.’ Mary was even more frightened. She had been right that he came from God. But why had he called her ‘favoured one’? In what way was she ‘favoured’ or even noticed by God? It was one thing to know that God loved her, but it was something quite different to get a visit from a heavenly messenger.

The visitor seemed to understand her worry, because he said: ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will have a baby and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign for ever and his kingdom will never end.’ A baby? This was the last thing that Mary had expected. She was just a young girl. She was engaged to a man called Joseph but they were not married yet. ‘How can I have a baby?’ Mary asked the visitor.

‘It will happen by the power of God,’ he said. ‘The baby will be holy and will be called the Son of God. God can do anything—your cousin Elizabeth is six months pregnant, even though she is an old lady and has
been waiting all her life to have a baby. Nothing is impossible with God.' Mary thought about what the visitor had said: 'you will have a baby' and 'nothing is impossible with God'. God was saying that she would be the mother of the new king, the Messiah. He would be her baby. She would need to care for him so that he could grow up to do God's will and change the world. She had never thought of the Messiah as a baby before. 'But even the Messiah needs a mother,' she thought, 'and, after all, I prayed that the Messiah would come and now I must play my part.'

Mary spoke to the heavenly visitor and said, 'Here I am. I am the Lord's servant. May everything happen just as you have said.' The heavenly messenger left her. Mary wondered when the baby would start to grow inside her. She wondered how it would feel to be a mother; then she remembered what the visitor had told her about Elizabeth. Elizabeth would understand how she was feeling! Mary asked her mother and father if she could go on a visit to see her cousin. They agreed.

When Mary was near to Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth came out to meet her. Before Mary could tell Elizabeth what had happened, Elizabeth called out to her, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child in your womb! I am honoured that the mother of my Lord should visit me. As soon as I saw you, the baby inside me leapt for joy. You are blessed because you believe that what God has said to you will really happen.'

[We hang a white rose on the tree as a symbol of Mary. It reminds us that she chose to be God's servant with perfect love and obedience.]

A moment to wonder

I wonder what sort of things Mary did to get ready to be the mother of Jesus?

A prayer

As green as a healthy tree, the story of God's love keeps growing. We remember Mary, who said 'Yes' to God. We pray for everyone who feels that God is calling them to do something new. Amen.