

St Mary Magdalen, Oxford
Feast of the Annunciation, 2020
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Luke's account of the Annunciation is one of the best known passages in the New Testament. Many of us have heard it so often that we could probably recite it by heart. It has also inspired more great art than any part of the gospel except perhaps the nativity scene itself and the crucifixion. There are for example the great Renaissance paintings of the annunciation by Fra Angelico and Raphael. Even earlier the subject was a favourite illustration for meditation in Books of Hours. Or smaller paintings decorated initials in service books like the one in a Gradual held now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It was painted about 1300 by Dominican nuns on Lake Constance, where the scene adorns the letter R - this being the opening of the Introit for Mass on this Feast Day - *Rorate caeli de super* (Drop down dew, you heavens, from above) - something we are more familiar with from Advent. But at its heart there is an apparently simple story. A young unmarried village girl receives a visit from an angel, and is told she will have a son who will be both royal and divine. She is disturbed, afraid, and questioning. But when the angel elaborates, and explains that this conception and birth will be the work of God's Holy Spirit, she responds to God's call with the memorable words, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

The apparent simplicity is just that – apparent. The more one hears the story of the annunciation, and the more one asks of it, the more layers of meaning it offers.

The most obvious layer of meaning is that Luke is writing far more than a birth story, far more even than the miraculous birth stories so common in accounts of significant figures in his day. He is using the story as a prologue to the whole gospel, as a means of theological communication. His narrative and depiction of Mary and her response is equivalent to what the writer of John says in words: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." This is a Feast of the Incarnation. Luke is telling us that the coming of Jesus was no god masquerading as a human, as in some other religious traditions. Jesus was from his conception our bone, our flesh and blood, a child who

would grow like us within human confines of space and time, of culture and religious tradition. And yet It was from within this human existence that the very nature of God was revealed, that God was seen to be at work. Putting it in theological language rather than a narrative, we read in Colossians, “For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ... (Ch.1, 19-20): and in Hebrews, “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Ch.1, 3)

But of course “the great mystery of the incarnation” – to use the words of the Christmas bidding prayer – is also about us. For as Christ inhabited our flesh, became enfleshed and fully human, so that human identity and nature was also raised with him into the Father’s presence. As one of the most famous Ascension hymns puts it,

*Mighty Lord, in thine Ascension
We by faith behold our own.*

Another layer of meaning in Luke’s story is of course that Mary listens – and listens expectantly. She is a pattern for our own lesser annunciations. As I know I have said from this pulpit before, we are generally not very good at listening – either to each other or to God. Mary from within her own religious culture knew that God was not a remote God, but a God who comes to his people, particularly to those for whom he has some special message or task. And for her like all Jews, an angelic visitation was a sign that God was present and at work – which is of course why the Old Testament tells us that people who met angels were often very afraid indeed. Jacob saw in a dream angels going up and down a ladder reaching into heaven and he encountered God. When he woke he knew that God had been present in that very place, and he was afraid. (Genesis 28) Isaiah’s terrifying vision of the Lord enthroned (ch.6) was full of angels. Daniel was speechless with fear at the angelic visitation he received. Even the humble donkey in the story of Balaam recognised an angelic presence, and when his master’s eyes were open he fell on his face in fear. (Numbers, 22) From within this religious and scriptural tradition Mary listens and expects to hear God’s word. Few of us I suspect are likely to meet angels in any literal sense of the word. But if angels are essentially God’s messengers, then indeed we should expect to meet

them, to hear them and to listen to them. Luke reminds us that we need to take time to listen, to be alert to the many ways in which God speaks to us, if we are to hear what He wants us to do for Him. The Feast day often falls in Lent and it teaches us that Lent is partly about openness and emptiness before God, laying aside some of the clutter which prevents us hearing His call.

Even deeper in the narrative of the Annunciation is the message implicit in the whole story is that God loves us, needs us and trusts us to do his work in this world. The same is true for us as it was for Mary. The realisation that God actually loves us, desires us, wants us and needs us is a huge step in our spiritual lives, in our journeys of faith. We more often think of our need of God, our desire for Him, however weak that may be. But that God should desire us, and should need us for his purposes – that is awe-inspiring and humbling. We might echo Mary's words, "How can this be?" And to us too comes the answer that in our place and time God's overshadowing power and the work of the Holy Spirit will alone enable us to respond to His love and His need for us.

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."