

## Advent IV, 2023

*The Annunciation, Luke 1:26-38.*

If you'd been standing there in Nazareth that day, in Mary's house, watching, what would you have seen?

What does an angel look like?

What would you have heard him – if it clearly *was* a 'him' say? Did he speak like one of us speaks?

Would anyone other than Mary have seen or heard anything, and how did she ever begin to describe to Joseph what had happened?

Who knows?

It's one of the most famous scenes in the whole Bible – imagined and reimagined by countless artists across the centuries. And yet, nobody knows what it really looked like. A crucifixion, well, we know what *they* looked like. They're public, ordinary, standard events. Annunciations are all together more intimate, mysterious, unspeakable.

Well, whatever it looked like, what was going on? Two things.

Firstly, God was acting. That's the most basic thing about today's Gospel, the most basic thing about *the* Gospel. There is a God. There is a reality wholly different from us, wholly beyond us, utterly other. And yet that reality is the source from which we all spring, a power which holds us in being at every moment, which allows us to be *at all*. There's something before which the only appropriate human response is to kneel down and worship.

And in the Annunciation, that *something* speaks. It acts. It says, I'm coming in. I'm coming into your world – and to Mary, more specifically, I'm coming into you, to be with you, to pour life into you, to make all the promises you've heard come true and more besides.

God *acts*. That's the most fundamental thing in the Gospel today.

And, almost as fundamental, Mary lets him. She hears what God wants do in her, and she says: 'here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your will.'

Now presumably, God *could* have just imposed Himself. He *could* just have said, I don't care about your freedom, about *you*, I'm just coming in. Get used to it.

But that doesn't appear to be the way He wants to work. He wants Mary's 'yes'. He wants her life, her body and soul, to open up to Him, to willingly become his way into the world. He will not force. And as he begins, so he continues – all the way to the Cross, God in Jesus refuses to force. Put away your swords. That stands for his whole way of working, from conception to glory. He wants our 'yes'.

And one of things we do in Advent IV, and one of the things we do in a properly whole Christian faith, is give honour and thanks and praise to Mary, the Blessed Virgin Mary, full of grace, most highly-favoured Lady, for giving the first yes, the greatest yes. Sometimes we react to people exaggerating the place of Mary and saying too much about her, that we say too little. Her words this morning, 'here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word' – they're what make salvation possible. God in Jesus is the one who saves, of course – but not without her. Blessed is she indeed among women, and we should be a bit more ready to say so.

Now, the Church has thought a great deal about the kind of person Mary must have been to be ready to answer that call. To be ready to say yes to God so freely and simply. She must have been a very special person indeed. Some trace that specialness right back to the very beginnings of her own life, her own conception. There might well be truth in that, but it is worth noting that the Bible doesn't say there was anything obviously extraordinary about her. And maybe even she didn't know she was anything special. Maybe in her own mind, she was just Mary, a standard Jewish teenager or twelve year old, whose life didn't look like anything special at all. In fact, whose life from some angles might have looked quite grim. Did she *want* to be married to Joseph – by most accounts, a considerably older man? She was just into her teens. When she looked forward to what life with him was likely to involve, did it look exciting, wonderful, glorious? I suspect it did not.

Which is worth recalling because we often find ourselves in the same situation. It is easy to look at our lives and think they are very dull, and perhaps worse than dull. Perhaps bleak. Futile. Perhaps there's a sense of not much look to forward to, of just passing time rather than living. Perhaps once we dreamed of doing amazing things, perhaps if we're lucky we even did them, but now, well, things are flat.

Well, if that is you, maybe hear from today's Gospel that God in Jesus still looks for his way into the world. He still needs people to say, 'here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your will.' God wants to do things, that people need to help Him with. There are ways in which everyone – *everyone*, no matter however old, however tired, however unlikely – is wanted. *Everyone* can be the person through whom God works. Indeed, more than can be, that's what God *wants*. God wants you to be the one through whom He acts.

By which I don't mean, by the way: join the bereavement team, be a pastoral visitor, help out with Tiny Tots. No, all those things and many more are indeed great and need done and I hope someone does them, but I'm talking about something more fundamental, and more unpredictable. God will have something for you. Some mission for you, like he had for Mary. Probably not quite as cosmic in its significance as it was for Mary. It might be something very small and mundane indeed, but nonetheless, it's what God wants from you. And besides that, all your other accomplishments – professional, family, material, whatever – really rather miss the point. *This* task is what you're here for. This what God wants.

Now, if that's true, then pretty much the single most important thing you can do is learn how to hear it. How do you know what God wants? And listen, for most of us, there is no short-cut here. The only way to know what God wants, is to listen. To listen very carefully, and very deeply. And you do that through reading the Bible, deeply and slowly. Through coming to communion, again and again and again. Through opening your eyes to the world around you and the people in pain. And above all through shutting up, and being still, and staying that way long enough every single day - till slowly, surely, you begin to sense what God wants. In short, you're called to deep prayerfulness. That is not something for the spectacularly committed, for the extra special religious people. No, this is bread and butter. This is basic Christianity. This is what *you* are called to. Yes, you.

There is simply no substitute for steady, regular, disciplined time with God every single day. You might not hear him instantly. In fact, you almost certainly won't. Most of us are far too distracted, shallow and all over the place for that. You'll only hear him slowly. There is no short-cut. And you'll need something to hold onto in that waiting, some way of keeping your heart and soul and mind focussed. Can I suggest to you that you could do a lot worse than Mary's own prayer? 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.' 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word'. Use that as a line to come back to again and again and again, a kind of mantra if you like. Read your Bible, pray Mary's words deeply, end with the Lord's Prayer, do that every day, for weeks and months and months more, and then see. You will begin to know what God would have you do, and you'll begin to receive the strength to do it. He's waiting on you. This Christmas, commit yourself to being there for Him.

To him be the glory, forever and ever.

Amen.