

Annunciation of the Lord

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Introduction

Today's gospel passage tells a very familiar story – one which forms the subject matter of innumerable paintings and provides lines and verses for many well-loved carols. But because of the role this vignette plays in a larger story, and because of the way we can read that through very particular lenses, we can also sometimes be guilty of not attending to the complexities and nuances of this moment. In looking more closely at these, we may also find things to help us in our quest to develop a spirituality which can help us when we encounter conflicts of different kinds.

Preparation:

If you can, find a copy of Fra Angelico's painting of the Annunciation at the Monastery of San Marco in Florence, and of Simone Martini's 'Annunciation with St Ansanus' in the Cathedral of Siena – which are both easily available online. Spend some time comparing the two images then engage with one of the following questions:

- Which image is *least* in keeping with your own idea of the Annunciation? Why?
- What differences are there between these depictions – how do you account for these?
- If you had to add speech/thought bubbles for Mary and/or Gabriel in either of these pictures what would they say?
- Tell the story of the Annunciation *as it is captured* in the moment depicted in either of these pictures.
- If you had to tell a story connecting these two moments – how would it unfold?

OR:

try to imagine your own version of the interior monologues which might have been going on in Gabriel and Mary during the course of the Annunciation story.

Text

Luke 1:26–38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called

Nazareth,

to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, 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 to him the throne of his ancestor David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Comment

"Who can tell what other cradle?
High above the Milky Way;
Still may rock the King of Heaven,
On another Christmas day?"

... wonders Sidney Carter in 'Every star shall sing a carol'. We might perhaps

legitimately bring the questions closer to home and ask who can tell what other 'Marys' Gabriel might have visited before finding one who said 'yes' to becoming *Theotokos* – the bearer of God?

When we read this passage, we sometimes move too swiftly to Mary's acquiescent "let it be with me according to your word", taking at as an uncomplicated given arrived at without question or effort – and Fra Angelico's Mary with her open robe, looking serenely into Gabriel's eyes as she mirrors his posture, might perhaps seem to capture this perfectly. We tend to equate 'perplexed' with a state of mild bewilderment, but the verb *diatarass* – the word used here – indicates that Gabriel's entrance and greeting considerably agitate and unsettle Mary, and perhaps we see something of this in Martini's Mary as she clutches her robe protectively round herself, and turns away – refusing the gaze of her rather wild-looking visitor.

Luke gives no direct indication as to how much time elapses before Gabriel continues with the message – and we often read this narrative as though all its elements follow in almost instantaneous succession. However the text tells us that following her initial response, Mary enters into an internal debate with herself. This questioning trait of Mary's is one which it seems Luke is at pains to emphasise: later, after the arrival of this foretold baby, we see her (Luke 2:18–19) engaging in two very different types of reflective practice as she considers the significance not just of the birth itself but of how it fits into a bigger picture (see *Year A Proper 2*) Here the verb – *dialogizomai* – points to yet another form of interior work: in this instance it seems that Mary takes time to deliberate thoroughly with herself, musing over and examining all the different things which could lie behind this peculiar encounter and where it might possibly lead.

Clearly though a moment comes when Gabriel sees that Mary is ready to hear more – and her first externally vocalised question with its very down to earth nature could be seen as indicative of a willingness to at least consider the possibility of a positive response. Once again Luke's narrative gives no indication of the time which elapses between Gabriel's further explanation and Mary's final and affirmative response – and indeed perhaps linear time ceases to be a thing in such situations! Eventually though we reach the moment which we anticipate, seize upon, and celebrate the moment we hear the words 'in the sixth month'

Ultimately however, this passage is not simply, or even primarily perhaps, about acceptance. It is a story about taking time, asking questions, and considering possibilities and consequences. We could perhaps see Martini's and Fra Angelico's very different Annunciations as representing different points of Mary's journey here. I also like to think that the latter's painting would be an equally fitting 'capture' if Mary were about to say 'No': her serenity comes from the fact that, like her son in the Garden of Gethsemane – whose words hers here foreshadow – she has made her own choice to say 'Yes' – even though perhaps intuiting that it will bring her into unfamiliar, difficult, and potentially dangerous territory. She is neither a captive of her own instinctive responses nor a passive object to be disposed according to someone else's will, but instead an active agent in both her own choices and the larger narrative of which she is a part.

We are highly unlikely to be confronted with the kind of cosmic choice set before Mary, but in situations of conflict we are likely to sometimes be faced with choices which have far reaching consequences for others and ourselves. Our initial response might well be to turn away and refuse to consider the possibility of even hearing the question but, as in this story, response can be part of an evolving narrative, not something fixed and decided by the first instant of emotion. Mary's example should encourage us to at least interrogate the possibilities when we are faced with such situations – to have an honest and earnest conversation with ourselves (and others) in pursuit of an informed and owned choice. We do not need to be swept along by our initial emotional responses or by a sense of 'inevitability' which robs us of, or excuses us from, of any sense of our own agency.

Response

Go back to the two paintings and imagine yourself as the 'Mary' depicted – but in a situation of conflict-related choice (large or small, private or public) in which you've been involved.

Which of these Marys do you feel most akin to? Why?

Is there anything you can learn from this which might challenge, help, or encourage you – either in a specific situation you currently face or as a guide for future situations? Are there any pointers from that for the development/strengthening of conflict-related skills?

If you didn't look at the pictures, review your emotional responses and choices of action/passivity in a conflict situation (large or small, private or public) you have been/are currently involved in. Can you trace out any journeys made as part of these? Are there any patterns you can see and learn/draw encouragement from?

Prayer

Mary
Marker of possibilities
Maker of choices
Mother of God

Help us
when the moment
comes

to hold the space
and take the time
to consider
and question
and consider again

that we too
may know the serenity
of making
owning
and fully inhabiting
our choices
and their consequences

Amen

