

Annunciation of the Lord

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Introduction

There are few things as unreal as the early days of pregnancy. The little blue line on a chemist shop kit does not prepare the new mother-to-be for the journey ahead. There is not time to decide whether one is happy or sad, glad or disappointed. For some there is sickness, for others an upheaval of emotions. Whether the pregnancy is planned or unplanned, whether this is a time of stability in that woman's life or a time of great uncertainty, all this feeds into how she is feeling, how she will react to the news.

For Mary, the Angel, named here as Gabriel, plays the part of the pregnancy testing kit, the child is not her fiancé's, there is definitely uncertainty ahead. The promises are not unpacked for her – "God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!"

One can't help wondering if her meek response was more one of shock than of acceptance, had she really had time to take in all this information? Have you had experience of pregnancy? Or is that not part of your life story? What can we read into this story about God's intentions in history, is the single story-line of the Kings of David leading down to Jesus through Joseph enough for us? Why did the author decide to mention it? What was this historical narrative's significance for the first century audience of this tale?

Text

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary. The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!"

Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!"

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

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. For there is nothing that God cannot do."

"I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her.

Comment

Traditionally in the church calendar the feast of the annunciation is placed on the 25th of March so as to be nine months from Christmas Day. This may all seem a little too neat for the modern reader. A due date is a moveable event in even the most straightforward of pregnancies and very rarely is the term of 40 weeks exactly that length of time. From the outside this story and its feast seem to be organised, too formal, to unreal to actually reflect what happened to Mary that day.

Another question for each of us to grapple with is the idea of an Angel. We each need to decide what we think, as adults of faith, about the appearance of an angel and the dialogue recorded between Mary and Gabriel. Is this a story? A metaphor? Or a historical recounting? What are the conflicts as we read, between ourselves and the text, between the story and our own life experience, between the different church traditions concerning this story and how we interact with them?

Do we consider that the young Mary would have been able to understand the idea of Jesus as a 'king' in the same way that David was a King. Did she imagine him picked by a prophet like Nathan, and set upon the throne? Was this, for her, a political destiny for her son? How can we know in what way Mary heard and understood this prophecy, if indeed that is what happened.

Through the gospels the idea of kingdom, and Christ's reign as a spiritual reality rather than an earthly kingdom, seeps into the text. In Luke 12 Jesus tells his followers that the Kingdom is already theirs, in Luke 11 he refers in contrast to the Kingdom of Satan, one of very few references to a personified evil. The Kingdom of God is drawn in these metaphors in distinction to the kingdoms of this world, and is given to the followers of Jesus as a way of understanding belonging to the faith which would, in due course, become Christianity.

Often Mary's calling to be the mother of Jesus is read in a narrative of female interaction, her relationship with Elizabeth being more important than her political or theological understanding of the calling of her son. However, Christ's own understanding of kingdom must surely have come in part from his mother's recounting of this story of the annunciation of his birth. Can we imagine that she will have taught him his politics and discussed with him the political and theological meaning of her calling, and his future ministry.

Mary as a voice of political intuitive power is heard in the Magnificat, an understanding is seen there of the reversals of the political norms of this world which come from following Christ, yet at this point he himself is in utero, there is

no Messiah to follow. Sure Mary's political understanding and theological acumen is formative for her son as well as descriptive of his life and ministry? Does that idea raise a conflict within as we understand the text, and build in our heads a story of the incarnation which has a mother of influence, understanding and power given the vocation of bearing, naming and raising Christ.

Response

Look again at the story of Hannah and Samuel, Elizabeth and John, and Mary and Jesus. What does scripture say to you about the role of motherhood in personal formation? Think about your own mother and your relationship with her – can you trace formative ideas and examples in that way? Or does this contain memories or ideas which are upsetting or disquieting? The psalmist asks the question, 'Can a mother forget her child' and the psalm begs the answer, 'yes'. Even so, God will not forget us.

OR

History and politics have always been uneasy bedfellows. Can you bring to mind a political situation today which affects you and which is based on certain historical assumptions? Why not find out more about the history behind the politics. Do some research, see if you can broaden or challenge the received ideas which you were taught as a young person. What can you learn about yourself in this way? About your own traditions? Is there anything to change for the future?

Prayer

God who is love

A love beyond sex, beyond family, beyond gender

We pray to you today in the knowledge

That our assumptions and our history

Have formed us as we are.

Some ideas are too dear to us, too costly to change, too important to threaten

Give us courage, as Mary had courage, to question the unquestionable.

Some traditions are second nature to us, almost habits upon which we rely

Give us insight as Mary had insight to see the habits which hurt or harm.

Some comforts are too important to us, we cannot let them go to raise up the poor or lowly.

Give us the humility that Mary had to raise up those who we perceive to be laid low.

God of surprises

May we find in each of life's surprises

A new angel to guide us

And explain to us the path

Now laid anew which willing

Or unwilling, our feet must follow

May your word be a light to that path

And a lamp for our feet

That more surely we

May find our selves in your kingdom

AMEN