

Fourth Sunday of Advent

24.12.2017
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

This final gospel text in Advent is a call to the deepest vocation, to believe that at the heart of things we are made for and by love: in our politics, in our societies, in our families, neighbourhoods, parishes and professions. Mary's life has both an overshadowing and a foreshadowing. An overshadowing of grace, and a foreshadowing of a sorrow. To survive the latter she needed reassurance of the former. To live through the conflicts of our lives — small conflicts, significant conflicts — we are served by a reassurance of love, vocation and grace.

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, favoured 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

The lectionary text for the fourth week of Advent brings us right into the the annunciation narrative that is the precursor to the birth narratives of Luke.

In this short text we are introduced to the angel Gabriel who goes to Mary and greets her with that famous greek word — kecharit men — translated into English as “highly favoured” or, in the words of the Hail Mary, “full of grace”. This word, and in particular, the peculiar tense in which it is rendered in Greek, was the subject of one of the Anglican/Roman Catholic Commission’s report “Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ”. That word — kecharit men — is in the perfect participle, and thus has a sense of expanse through time in it. The document translates it as: ‘one who has been and remains endowed with grace’.

It’s a peculiar scene, when one thinks of it. An angel appears and greets Mary in the perfect participle, and Mary is perplexed by the words of the greeting, not by the fact that an angel has just turned up in the parlour. The angel’s words, as recorded, speak about God, the Holy Spirit, the Most High, and a Son of God, a conception and how her son will be given the throne of his ancestor David, to reign over the house of Jacob forever.

No wonder she was perplexed.

What does all of this mean for today?

Global leaders making noises at each other about their respective powers; borders being crossed, closed, shut down, trampled down; despots destroying their homeland in the name of staking a claim on the very land they’ve just desecrated; people seeking sanctuary within their own borders; toxic masculinity being exposed as blight on the safety and dignity of women; systemic racial injustice being denied and the burdened being burdened with the weight of denial.

Kecharit men

I grew up saying the Rosary in Irish every night with my family. A tá lán de grásta is how Irish puts “full of grace”. In my late teens, I remember being embarrassed at the amount of time I’d spent praying the Rosary. Somehow the culture around it seemed more concerned with virginal purity than the daily grind. However, years later, I found myself searching for an icon appropriate to Christians seeking to live out an incarnated faith. What better way than to carry promise within you, to centre your life around the demands of a promise, to say ‘yes’ to that which at the heart of us: the breath of god that enlivens humanity.

This final gospel text in Advent is a call to the deepest vocation, to believe that at the heart of things we are made for and by love: in our politics, in our societies, in our families, neighbourhoods, parishes and professions. Mary’s life has both an overshadowing and a foreshadowing. An overshadowing of grace, and a foreshadowing of a sorrow. To survive the latter she needed reassurance of the former. To live through the conflicts of our lives — small conflicts, significant conflicts — we are served by a reassurance of love, vocation and grace.

Kecharit men

(The full text of the ARCIC’s document “Mary Grace and Hope in Christ” can be found [on the Vatican website here](#))

Response

Contemporary theories of conflict recognise that the way we think about others, and the ways we think about ourselves, influences our capacity to resolve conflicts. So if I think that groups are incapable of change, then I am unlikely to resolve my conflict with a grouping of people I dislike, not only because I dislike them, but also because I think groups are unchangeable. And if I think I am always wrong, then I am going to let that influence the ways in which I seek to resolve conflicts, or avoid them.

The Buddhist traditions have a Metta meditation – a meditation on loving kindness, into which you bring yourself, your loved ones, and also those with whom you have conflict.

This Sunday's gospel text calls us to a meditation of being loved, of considering what it means to be pre-empted by love. How would this influence the conflicts that we have on a daily basis? To have a simple, breathing belief that we are loved.

Marie Howe's poem "Annunciation" (*recited for the On Being radio programme here: <https://onbeing.org/blog/annunciation/>*) narrates this week's text through the lens of love. Consider how this might support your community in navigating the conflicts and tensions that arise over Christmas.

Prayer

God of love,
Before the ocean was
before the skies
before even breath was breathed
there was love.
And because of this, we know we can ask
to be held in love
even in the tempests of today.
So hold us in love,
because in this love
words can be created
to hold and heal a world.
We ask this in the name
of someone who was born
in a time of trouble
to be a person of peace.
Amen.