



Sunday Reflection Sunday Reflection Ordinary Time



in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone

For Sunday 24 December 2023

Advent 4

at St Johns the Curate will preach

Today, as we wait for the fulfilment of God's faithful promise in the coming of God's son, we ask what it takes to believe the impossible – that the hungry will be fed, that there will be peace on earth. How can we enter into Mary's joyful co-operation with God's will?

For nothing will be impossible with God. (Luke 1.37)

An illustration to set the scene

Have you ever been faced with taking a risk that you felt you would never have the courage to face? Try to remember what it was that gave you the strength to go through with it.

My examples would always involve tall buildings or climbing up to high places - because I'm terrified of heights. On one occasion I foolishly persuaded myself I could walk up the path of a mountain that I had seen from a distance. I got up there, well nearly to the top, and then I turned round. And I froze. I couldn't take a step. Well, I got down, eventually. It took hours, one step at a time. How could that be?

I was not on my own.

I trusted the person with me.

And I trusted them because I knew they kept their promises. When they said they would walk with me. I knew I could believe it.

Today's Gospel Teaching

In today's Gospel we meet a quite different messenger from John the Baptist, but one equally sent from God, God's messenger, the angel Gabriel.

The Angel Gabriel doesn't appear often. He pronounced wrath in the Book of Daniel (Daniel 8.15-27) and he has just appeared to Zechariah – but I'm getting ahead of myself.

It is hard to imagine a more abrupt change of scene from the Judean desert we have visited for the last two weeks. Luke's story always strikes me as like a film – we swoop down from heaven and here we are in the town of Nazareth.

And that's the point really. Astonishingly, God is coming directly into the world – to a particular place and a particular woman.

The scene is familiar from paintings throughout the ages. Often, Mary is seated beside an open book, a sign of her openness to the Word of God. The room may look exotic to us, but it is invariably the ordinary domestic interior of the time. In the contemporary image by Gwyneth Leech at St Mary's Cathedral, above the east window between the roof timbers, Mary clearly sits in a Glasgow tenement. And she is dropping her book in sheer surprise. For it is in ordinary, everyday places and ordinary everyday lives that God surprises. And these moments and these places are at the same time, holy.

Perhaps the poet Jan Richardson had a good insight when she wrote that maybe Gabriel, as well as Mary, was afraid. Gabriel of the message he was about to deliver, knowing it would 'cleave her life' in two. There would be no going back.

Be that as it may, he does deliver his big messages in quite a rush.

Mary is favoured by God.

She is to have a son.

He will be great.

He will be called the Son of the Most High – the Messiah and inherit his ancestor King David's throne

And,

'He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' (v.33)

What did the young girl make of all this breaking news of such great national, even cosmic import? She focused on the personal. How could this happen to her, given she was a virgin?

The Holy Spirit will overshadow her, he explains, and then he gets back to momentous announcements, the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. But what he says next changes everything. You know your elderly cousin Elizabeth, who couldn't have children, well she is already six months' pregnant! Elizabeth has already received God's grace of pregnancy and will be journeying with her. And Mary accepts the grace she is offered. Her questions stop and she gives her wonderful, trusting assent, *'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'* (v. 38). Her words prefigure those of Jesus at Gethsemane: *'Yet not my will but yours be done.'* (Luke 22.42b).

I said we would come back to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband. He was of a very different status to Mary, a priest, leading worship in the Temple when he had a vision of Gabriel. But Zechariah's reaction was different when he got the message that Elizabeth was to have a son (who would of course be John the Baptist). He was afraid, and rather than burst into song as would Mary, he became mute, unable to speak, a symbol of his inability at that point to trust in the Lord's promise.

Mary and Elizabeth are in the long line of courageous women whom the Bible describes – Hannah, Sarah - who set out trusting enough to follow where God leads.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

The Annunciation is a story of what St Paul calls the obedience of faith, willingly assenting to God's plan for us and the world. The question is, how can that happen?

In Mary's response to Gabriel we see how. God breaks into her life. At first, she is troubled. But she soon reaches that moment of mature acceptance because she is reminded of the promises of God, shown that the impossible can happen and assured that someone she knew was on the same path. When she accepts God's call, she does it with her whole heart and mind and is at peace with it.

And so, for us. We are called to trust in the impossible goodness and hope of God's promises for us and for our world, that all will be redeemed. How can this be? We are appalled by horrendous tragedies – the stabbing and shooting of young people by young people, the unimaginable horrors of war and famine and in our own rich country, children too cold and malnourished to learn when they are at school, if they are at school.

We can hope and believe because we have seen that we can trust in God's faithfulness, and we know that God walks with us. It may seem as though the main point of our readings today is the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecy, that Jesus is the descendant of David and so will inherit his Kingdom. But underlying the touching story of the Annunciation is a deeper meaning—that God is faithful and God is with us. It's what the Lord said to David when he promised faithfully to be with him and his descendants for ever. And it is what Mary hears, *'the Lord is with you.'*

The Queen in Alice in Wonderland knew that it takes practice to have the imagination to believe the seemingly impossible. *'There's no use trying,' [Alice] said. 'One can't believe impossible things.' 'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I*

*was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.*¹ Mary must have felt a bit like that. And it is our challenge too.

That's why we need Mary to believe in the impossible goodness and mercy of God. To remember that she sang her great hymn of praise to God, trusting that his promises were real. That God is with us and walks with us and has a heart for those who suffer injustice. We know that God's will is for the Kingdom to come on earth and for violence, war, poverty and injustice to cease. And if it is God's will, then it can be ours too and we are called to play our part.

Lord, teach us to trust you enough to believe in the impossible. Walk with us when we are afraid that we are not up to the vision you set before us and let your Holy Spirit so overshadow us that your will for this world becomes ours. Here we are, the servants of the Lord; let it be with us according to your word.

For nothing will be impossible with God. (Luke 1.37)

at St Margarets the Rector will preach

In the midst of the bustle of Christmas preparations, we take time to praise, pray and reflect, listening out for God's call, trying to hear, nurture and respond to the heartbeat of Christ in our lives.

"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." Luke 1:32

An illustration to set the scene

In the Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art there is a painting by Jyoti Sahi entitled "**Dalit Madonna**".ⁱ

¹ Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland.



Dalit refers to the lowest stratum of the castes in India – the term **“untouchable”** was once used.

Surrounded by yellow sunflowers in cornfields, an almost circular, billowing, young Indian woman sits cross-legged on the ground, cradling in her arms an egg or womb shape, within which nestles her baby.

While the image has a most definite Indian origin, its colours, textures and the downward-curving crescent moon in the right-hand corner evoke a series

of landscapes by the pastoralist Samuel Palmer, in which the English working countryside is suffused with the presence of God.

An Indian folk symbol inspired Jyoti Sahi's image.

Set into the courtyard outside many traditional homes is a grinding stone.

The large, round, fixed base stone is the *"Mother Stone"*; out of its centre a hollow space is carved into which fits a smaller egg-shaped stone.

Known as the *"Baby Stone"*, it moves around causing friction for grinding foodstuffs.

Reminiscent of the bond between mother and child, it also brings to mind images of God feeding us, of Jesus as the bread of life, and of the necessity for grain to be broken for bread to be made.

Today's Gospel teaching

Three of the verses (2 Samuel 7:12-14) that are skipped over in today's first reading speak of God raising up offspring of David, who will be divinely established as a house and kingdom for ever.

Enough sense remains in the lectionary text for us to appreciate how Gabriel's speech to Mary in our Gospel draws upon this passage.

David intends to make a house for God, but is given a house of descendants instead.

Meanwhile, Mary's womb becomes, for a time, the dwelling place for God.

The opening words of this episode connect back to the events recounted in the passage that comes immediately before it.

Indeed, there are many parallels and contrasts between the annunciation to Zechariah and that to Mary.

These show that, while they are linked through family relationships and by God's intentions for them, there are major differences between John, who will be the Baptist, and Jesus.

Where John will have a great role in God's vision for creation, Jesus will be both great and the Son of the Most High.

John will have a temporary preparatory role, while Jesus will be a ruler whose kingdom has no end.

John will be a prophet, filled with the Holy Spirit, whereas Jesus, by the overshadowing of that same Spirit, will be Son of God.

The episode ends with fresh mention of Elizabeth and her pregnancy, but by now it is clear that Mary's child is to be in a unique relationship with God and will be much more than a continuation of the Davidic line of kingship.

Indeed, in her closing words, when she declares herself to be the servant of the Lord, we find Mary prefiguring the type of servant king her son will turn out to be.

How we can apply the teaching to our own lives

The rich details of this passage take us in different directions, exploring how those often disparaged by society, such as a barren older couple and a young, pregnant, single girl, become agents of God's plans for humanity; or into tracing Jesus' continuity with, and surpassing of, the Davidic line of divinely appointed kings.

Mary's "**yes**" to Gabriel's message, her questioning, believing and humility, provide opportunities to examine a biblical model of good discipleship.

The title of Jyoti Sahi's painting, "**Dalit Madonna**", makes a link between Mary and those deemed to be outcasts, adding poignancy to lines we also hear today in the Magnificat.

The artist recalls the imminence of Jesus' birth, when the child cradled for nine months in the comforting, protected palace of the womb will enter the risky, messy, often hostile, world.

His imagery of grinding stones, alongside Mary's own declaration of servant status (*in some translations the word "slavery" is used*) reminds us that sacrifice is an integral aspect of the Christian story; that even when we find ourselves at the joyful heart of Christmas, we are always travelling towards the bread of many grains offered to all at the Last Supper, the brokenness of Good Friday and the new birth of Easter resurrection.

"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." Luke 1:32

www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk

ⁱ From

https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/1215/jyoti_sahi_the_dalit_madonna.jpg?width=1544.5727482678983&height=1920