

Advent Compline 2025: The Annunciation to Mary St Luke 1. 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."^[b] ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² 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. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"^[c] ³⁵ 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^[d] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ 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.

At our Dawn Service on Easter Day, as we light the brazier to illuminate the early morning darkness, we begin with the opening verses of Genesis 1: *In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth, God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light.* It is dramatic way to begin our Easter Day worship, recalling the fact that creation began in the context of utter darkness. The theological point, of course, is that creation finds its origin not in some extraordinary but seemingly random cosmic happening, but in God's desire to create as an expression of his very nature and Name. Indeed, the very words *Let there be light*, teach us much of what we need to know about the One we call God. As St John said, *God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.*

But there could be no greater contrast with the setting of this evening's reading. We are taken to an undistinguished town in Galilee called Nazareth and to a young woman called Mary. But just as last week we reflected on the coming of the Angel Gabriel to the priest Zechariah in the Temple, announcing that his aged wife Elizabeth would conceive a son, so Gabriel continues to herald the divine plan of salvation.

So, we are told that in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary of Nazareth. We are told little about her except that she was a virgin and betrothed, but not yet married, to a man called Joseph who was from the house of David, a descendent of Israel's greatest King. Once again, Luke tells us nothing about Gabriel's appearance. In the Bible, sometimes angels are portrayed as

glorious heavenly beings, bright and shining; sometimes they seem to look entirely human; the author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells his hearers that some of them have entertained angels unawares. Perhaps angels defy any attempt to describe them – it may be that Mary felt a sense of the overwhelming and mysterious presence of the divine; that she was bathed in light. We can only speculate about *what* exactly Mary experienced; what she felt or saw. And indeed, what she heard, whether inwardly or outwardly; whether this visitation came to her in an instant or over a period of time; whether she was alone or with others, at home or in synagogue. But irrespective of how Mary heard; the message was extraordinary.

Whatever Mary experienced, like Zechariah she was terrified - the English translation *perplexed* doesn't do justice to Luke's Greek. But she is greeted warmly; Gabriel calls her 'favoured one' and says that God is with her. But she is clearly also taken aback – what kind of greeting is this? Gabriel once again tells Mary not to be afraid, the same words he said to Zechariah. Gabriel tells Mary that she will conceive, that she will bear a son and the child, like John the Baptist, is named not by a parent, but by God – 'You will call your son Jesus' – or Joshua, which means God is salvation. But it gets even more extraordinary – first Mary learns that her son will be great; that he will be called Son of the Most High and that he will inherit King David's throne. So, this child will be a new Davidic King – but remember the Kings of Judah in the past regarded themselves as God's anointed sons – this was not a claim to be divine, but rather a sign of adoption and choice. But Gabriel continues that this new King will reign *for ever*; that his Kingdom will *never end*. This sets this new King apart from all others.

This is a lot to digest! For Mary, the issue is how this can be. She is not doubting Gabriel's words as Zechariah did, but simply asserting the fact of her virginity. And so, it is in this story of the Annunciation, that we see God making as significant a new beginning as when once he said, *Let there be light*. For this is to be a new and sovereign act of creative power. Jesus is not simply the latest product of yet another human conception: A begat B and B begat C and C begat D - right through human history. By an act of the same Holy Spirit, who first brooded over the primeval darkness, God mysteriously and wonderfully makes in the one we know as the Lord Jesus Christ a union of divinity and humanity – 'our God contracted to a span' as Charles Wesley memorably wrote. And Mary hears the most solemn, the most spine-tingling, remarkable statement. imagine the awe in Gabriel's voice: How can this be?

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.

The point is that God begins in Mary's pure womb something entirely new, something unthinkable, something mind-blowing. And he accomplishes in us, in a human being, flesh of our flesh. This is what led in time to the great doctrine of

theosis, that God in Christ assumed our human nature in order that we might become partakers of his divine nature; that God in Christ came right down among us in order to raise to the heights; that he came to share even - to use St Paul's language - '*the likeness of our sinful flesh*', a human nature like ours, in order to restore it by his sinless obedience.

And Gabriel then informs Mary that her relative Elizabeth had conceived in her old age. God's divine plan is being fulfilled through a post-menopausal woman and a young virgin, for nothing is impossible with God, who is the God of creation, who once said, *Let there be light and there was light*.

And Mary responds: 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'.

There is a beautiful insight from St Augustine, the great 4th century North African bishop. Commenting on this passage, Augustine points out that Gabriel tells Mary that she *was* to conceive, not that she *had* conceived. Augustine says, 'Mary, full of grace, first conceived Jesus in her heart before she conceived him in the womb'. Mary's response to this extraordinary visitation meant that there was a kind of double conception. Without the first conception, the second could not have happened. Her heart, which embraces her will, her mind, even her soul - in other words, her 'yes', her submission to the divine Will, was the primary act of grace that enabled those noble words of the Prayer Book Communion service we say at Christmas:

For by the operation of the Holy Ghost he was made very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary his Mother, and that without spot of sin to make us clean from all sin.

How God dignifies our humanity! No wonder we speak of St Mary as the second Eve, the new Mother of humanity. Unlike John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, she did not dismiss the divine message which rendered him dumb until the day of fulfilment. Rather, she assented, and her mouth was opened in praise as she poured forth her *Magnificat*. The silence of Zechariah is contrasted with the exuberant shout of Mary. And Mary recognised that this vocation, thrilling yet humanly terrifying, had come to her in her lowliness. Not to the haughty, proud or important, but to the humble and meek. *He has looked upon the lowliness of his handmaiden*.

Mary first conceived in her heart. The Son of God filled her heart before he was formed in her body. No wonder therefore that on his birth, St Luke twice tells us that Mary 'treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart'. She held him in her heart.

For God said once again, *Let there be light.*

And there was light.