

Sermon (2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16, Magnificat, Romans 16.25-end, Luke 1.26-38)

In the name the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of my favourite pieces of art is the fresco painted by the 15th century Dominican friar and artist, Fra Angelico, depicting the Annunciation. It is located at the monastery of San Marco in Florence and shows a room with columns and arches, but no wall, where the angel Gabriel brings the news to Mary that she will give birth to the Son of God.

Frescos, such as this, were intended to help the friars with their life of prayer, acting as visual reminders of their devotion. The painting of the Annunciation is located at the top of the set of stairs which led to the monks' cells. Before going to their rooms for prayer, rest or study, they would pause on the landing and kneel before it. It marked a moment of transition as they left the ordinary, communal life of the Friary and entered the simplicity, quietness and solitude of their own cells. For the Friar, seeing Mary saying her 'yes' to God was a reminder of his own call to respond daily with his, equally obedient, 'yes'.

It is a truly remarkable scene, both in the painting and in the words from Luke's Gospel. An angel appears to a young girl, and she is "*much perplexed*", not by the presence of an angelic being in her bedroom, but by the fact that he has called her "*favoured*". Her confusion stems from God's greeting, God's way of describing her, God's way of seeing her - a young girl - in a world where those such as herself were far from "*favoured*" usually, and she ponders in a wonderful understatement: "*What kind of greeting this could be*". Why should God suggest that she, of all people, had found favour in God's eyes? And why would God describe himself as '*with her*'?

Gabriel addresses her confusion with gentleness: "*Don't be afraid.*" Then, without any further hesitation, he reveals the purpose of his visit. Out it pours - almost breathlessly. She is to bear a Son who will be called '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 for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end"

Mary would have been well aware that the people of God had been expecting something like this - news of a King. They knew that a descendant of David would one day again sit on the throne. That was the promise to David in 2 Sam 7:16: "... *the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever*". They knew the promise.

But here is Mary.

God would build himself a house and throne and his descendants would reign for ever.

But not like this, surely?

Mary - a young girl, probably no more than 15 - engaged to Joseph, living in a second-rate town called Nazareth, a working-class suburb of the great city of Sepphoris. We can deduce from the insults later fired at Jesus about his hometown, and the sarcastic inscription over his head on the cross, that Nazareth was not viewed highly. Mary from Nazareth is a nobody from nowhere.

And she knows it.

Gabriel senses her doubts and quickly counters her uncertainty: "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you*" - God's power will overshadow you and the child will be holy, indeed will be the

Son of God. From this insignificant girl from nowhere, God will raise up the one who is to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the greatest of all who ever lived and ruled.

Then comes the punch-line: "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*"

And in that moment, Mary takes him at his word, ludicrous as it sounds, overcomes her fears, and reaches out, carefully, slowly, towards her God: "*Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*"

Mary's YES.

This pattern of the encounter between Mary and the angel can be seen in almost any call from God to individuals to serve him in some particular way. Whenever God wants us to do something - or *become* something - he reaches out, greets us, and makes himself known. He calms our fears, counters our doubts, shows us that his ways are hardly ever his ways, and asks for our obedient 'yes'.

I remember this very well when aged 23 and pregnant with my first child I sensed the Lord calling me to ordained ministry. I had wrestled with God about the ridiculous nature of this call. I was too young and anyway, how would that all work out with a baby? Then one Advent, I was still perplexed, as I sat in church and heard this reading from Luke. It suddenly struck me in that moment that God always had used young women in his plans. And I was simply being asked to become a vicar, not to bear the Christ-child, so what was I worrying about? I heard God saying to me '*Don't be afraid. Nothing is impossible with me*'.

It was in that moment that I said my 'yes' to God's call.

Inevitably, when God reaches out to us in this way, and calls us to respond, we are filled with uncertainty and anxiety, but God has a way of calming our fears, if we will let him. Often our natural reaction to God's call is to protest that it isn't possible - we aren't up to it; there are a thousand reasons why he really should consider someone else. But God gently but firmly counters our disbelief with the promise that we will never have to do anything on our own. His Spirit is *always* with us. We can be assured that whatever strength we need, God himself will supply. Although, he might not do things in the way we expect.

The annunciation begins the whole subversive story of the incarnation. Mary is perplexed at the angel's greeting. And her Son comes proclaiming a kingdom which is as different from others of its kind, as the Messiah is from all other kings; a Kingdom in which - as his mother once sung - the proud are scattered, the powerful brought down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up, the hungry filled and the rich sent empty away. God's fulfilment the promise made to David to reconcile the world to himself through a throne and a kingdom, was not about wealth, power and privilege but about service, love, obedience, and a young girl's whispered 'yes'.

This last Sunday in Advent, the angel breaks in to our insignificance once again and upsets what we thought we were supposed to be doing, what we thought mattered, and how all of it was supposed to be achieved. As we ascend the stairs and pause on the landing on the way up to Christmas, will we kneel, and join her in saying: '*Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word*'?

Amen.