

THE ANNUNCIATION

Chapter 1 of “The Mysteries of the Christian Life”

The Scriptural Basis

The story of the Annunciation is told by St. Luke in the opening chapter of his Gospel. Archbishop Goodier once described it as “the most perfect short story ever told.”

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?' 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you' the angel answered 'and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.' 'I am the handmaid of the Lord,' said Mary 'let what you have said be done to me.' And the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Luke starts his gospel by explaining that he has carefully gone over the whole story from the beginning in order to get it

straight. Many people have wondered how he found out about this part of the story, and one theory is that Our Lady told him about it. This may well be the case, but Luke is not just writing a history: he is trying to record “the things that have been accomplished among us” (1:1) – i.e. what God has done for us. To do this he brings his own style and message to the events.

Where does it happen?

The story takes place in Nazareth in Galilee, an area in the North of the Holy Land. It consists of a ring of hills and the Sea of Galilee. At the time when these events took place it was a known hotbed of revolt against the Romans. Within this area, Nazareth was an obscure town, with probably only about 150 inhabitants.

Who is involved?

The central characters of the story are an angel, identified as Gabriel, and a young girl called Mary. An angel is a messenger of God. Angels

are often mentioned in the OT. Gabriel is first mentioned by name in the book of Daniel, although it is a non-Scriptural book (Enoch) that identifies him as an archangel (the highest “rank” of angels). His name means “God is my strength”.

Luke does not tell us how old Mary was at the time of the Annunciation, but Tradition has it that she was young, perhaps in her early teens. This agrees with what Luke tells us, that she was a virgin, already betrothed but not yet married.

Who says what?

Gabriel’s opening words to Mary are very familiar to us, from the opening words of the “Hail, Mary”. But actually there are one or two odd details about the way Gabriel starts the meeting. The normal Jewish greeting would have been “*Shalom*”, meaning “Peace be with you”.

But Gabriel does not say this. Instead, according to the Greek text he says “*Chaire*” – “Hail”. This is because Luke deliberately wants his readers to remember a particular passage in the OT: “Sing aloud, O Daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O



Murillo: “Immacolata”

Daughter of Jerusalem.” (*Zephaniah 3:14*). This passage goes on to explain that the Daughter of Sion should rejoice *because the Lord is coming* – the Messiah is here. In the Greek text the word that is used for “Rejoice” is “*Chaire*”. In the same way, Gabriel’s greeting, “*Chaire*”, is an announcement of the coming of the Messiah.

The next slightly surprising detail is that although we say “Hail, *Mary*” in our prayer, Gabriel does not say that. Mary’s name means “Excellence”, but the angel does not use this name when he first greets her. Instead he calls her “Full of Grace” or “Highly Favoured One”. He then explains to her what it means: she is to conceive and bear a son whom she is to call “Jesus”, meaning “God saves”. Thus, “Highly Favoured One” describes the role that Mary is being called upon to accept: she is the object of God’s favour because of what is asked of her.

Not unreasonably, Mary asks how this can come about – after all, she is a virgin, so how can she conceive a child? Luke has already mentioned that Mary is a virgin (v.27), and some people see it as significant that he now stresses it again in the light of the Church’s teaching that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. Gabriel does not tell Mary very much – he doesn’t say anything about the Cross, for example – but he does explain that it will happen through the power of God, and proves to her that God can do everything by giving her the news about Elizabeth’s pregnancy. After that he waits for her reply.

In one of his Homilies “In Praise of the Virgin Mother”, St. Bernard expresses the drama of the moment of the Annunciation, when all creation hangs upon the answer of Mary to the angel.

“You have heard that you shall conceive and bear a Son; you have heard that you shall conceive, not of man, but of the Holy Spirit. The angel is waiting for your answer: it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for the word of pity, even we who are overwhelmed in wretchedness by the sentence of damnation.

“And behold, to you the price of our salvation is offered. If you consent, straightway shall we be freed. In the eternal Word of God were we all made, and lo! We die; by one little word of yours in answer shall we all be made alive.

“Adam asks this of you, O loving Virgin, poor Adam, exiled as he is from paradise with all his poor wretched children; Abraham begs this of you, and David; this all the holy fathers implore, even your fathers, who themselves are dwelling in the valley of the shadow of death; this the whole world is waiting for, kneeling at your feet.

“And rightly so, for on your lips is hanging the consolation of the wretched, the redemption of the captive, the speedy deliverance of all who otherwise are lost; in a word, the salvation of all Adam’s children, of all your race.

“Answer, O Virgin, answer the angel speedily; rather, through the angel, answer your Lord. Speak the word, and receive the Word; offer what is yours, and conceive what is of God; give what is temporal, and embrace what is eternal.

“Why delay? Why tremble? Believe, speak, receive! Let your humility put on boldness, and your modesty be clothed with truth. Not now should your virginal simplicity forget prudence! In this one thing alone, O prudent Virgin, fear not presumption; for although modesty that is silent is pleasing, more needful now is the loving-kindness of your word.

“Open, O Blessed Virgin, your heart to faith; open your lips to speak; open your bosom to your Maker. Behold! The desired of all nations is outside, knocking at your door. Oh! If by your delay he should pass by, and again in sorrow you should have to begin to seek for him whom your soul loves! Arise, then, run and open. Arise by faith, run by the devotion of your heart, open by your word. ‘And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to your word.’”

Could Mary have refused? Yes, she could. She was totally free to do so. What would have happened if she had? We would not have been saved. It’s as simple as that. The whole of the OT leads to this moment, and God did not have a plan B.

What Does It Mean?

In this Mystery we should reflect on two related things: “Vocation” and “Faith”. Mary was called, and knew herself to be called, to be the mother of the Messiah. We don’t know how much she understood about that, nor do we know how much she realised what it would mean for her life. Probably not very much. Nevertheless, she knew that

God was calling her, and she answered that call, in humility, but without false modesty. She believed in God’s power and His love; she believed herself to be His handmaid, at His command. Each of us has a vocation too, a calling from God. For each of us it’s a calling that no one else in creation has. It may be something unexpected, and we may not know where it will lead us in this life, but in the darkness of our ignorance we can, like Mary, put our faith in God and humbly put our life into His hands.

Prayer Intentions

Pray that you and all your family may be open to find out what God wants you to do, and may be willing to answer His call in humility and faith.

An old schoolboy howler: “When Mary heard that she was to be the mother of Jesus she was so happy she sang the Magna Carta”

Here's a useless bit of information, except that it may help you when you are thinking about question 2:

In England, up until the 18th Century the year did not start on 1st January as it does now. Instead it started on 25th March, the Feast of the Annunciation, because that is the start of our salvation. (In the same way, some churches, especially Eastern Orthodox churches, have a painting of the Annunciation over the front door as you go in, because it is the gateway to salvation). Of all the places where we might find a remnant of this mark of piety in our world today, I'll bet no one would guess our tax system! This is how it works: because the calendar year used to start on 25th March, the tax year did the same. But, you cry, our tax year doesn't start on 25th March now. No, and that's because England did not want to join the European Union of its day, back in the 16th Century. The old Julian calendar, which was devised by Julius Caesar in 46 BC, and was used throughout the known world, did not correspond accurately enough with the time the earth takes to go round the sun, so that by the 16th Century an error of ten days had accumulated. Because of this Pope Gregory XIII reformed the Calendar in 1582. He ordered that, in order to make things right, the day after 4th October in that year should be reckoned as 15th October. England, being a Protestant country, was reluctant to adopt this new system, and did not do so until 1752. The result of this was that our tax year, instead of starting on New Year's Day (25th March), now begins on 6th April. Of such oddities does our life consist!

Your notes on this chapter