

First Sunday of Advent 1st December 2024

The First Joyful Mystery: The Annunciation - Mary's Fiat: saying 'yes' to God

In this series of articles for Advent, I will look at the scripture readings for the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary and try to offer some personal thoughts on how we might seek to use these bible passages from Luke's gospel to grow in faith.

I have always been drawn to paintings of the Annunciation, a subject that has been popular with artists throughout the ages from Duccio's exquisitely coloured fourteenth century masterpiece in the National Gallery to Helen Elwes contemporary work hanging at Campion Hall in Oxford. Observing the scene of peaceful domesticity we are invited, simultaneously, to witness the turning point in the entire story of the salvation of humanity that is at the heart of that meeting between the Angel Gabriel and Mary.

Although the bible itself is silent on the question of Mary's parents, numerous sources such as the second century apocryphal Gospel of St James, known as the Protovangelium, tell us that her parents were holy people called Anne and Joachim. The Church celebrates the Feast Day of Saints Anne and Joachim on 26th July and in that celebration it recognises their faith in raising the young woman who would go on to become Mother of Christ and Mother of God.

The Immaculate Conception of Mary is a topic for another day, but it will suffice for us to think on the fact that Mary's purity meant she had a heart which was totally open to God.

In paintings of the Annunciation a lily is very often featured, sometimes held by the Angel Gabriel and at other times in a vase. The symbolism of a lily to represent the purity of Mary can be traced back to at least as early as the writings of St Ambrose in the fourth century. This absence of sin in Mary herself and in her life is crucial to her ability to be utterly open before, and obedient to, God.

It is pivotal to the message of the Annunciation that when, through the representations of the Angel Gabriel, God asks Mary to become the mother of His Son, Mary has a choice. The angel does not depart from her until he has her answer. In the Jerusalem bible's translation of Luke 1:37 we are given Mary's

response to the Angel's message, "You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said." In the Revised Standard Version's translation of this verse, Mary says "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word". In this consent freely given, Mary says 'Yes' to God's plan of redemption for mankind through the birth, death and resurrection of His Son.

Mary's 'Let it be' is also known in Church doctrine as Mary's fiat, 'fiat' being the imperative form of the verb 'to be' in Latin. In this fiat, St Irenaeus of the second century tells us Mary becomes the "cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race".

In the online video presentation episode 20 'Mary and the Hope of Heaven' prepared for the Sycamore course, an explanation of the Catholic faith, Fr Stephen Wang concisely summarises the impact of Mary's fiat by noting "everything that Jesus has done for us depends on what Mary has done."

What struck me, when I reread Luke 1: 26 – 38, was the relative brevity of the exchange; the entire encounter between Mary and the Angel Gabriel probably lasts only a matter of minutes. And yet, upon that moment, over two thousand years ago in Nazareth, the destiny of the entire human race depends.

Mary said yes to God – can we?

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