

The Annunciation – a feminine perspective

A sermon preached by Revd Sarah Flashman on the Fourth Sunday of Advent 20 Dec 2020

Readings: 2 Samuel 7 v 1-11 & 16, Romans 16 v 25-27 & Luke 1 v26-38

I am a self-confessed book worm. My book collection is many and various and of course bible commentaries feature prominently among the collection. Yet, as I sat with this beautiful account of the Annunciation once again, I was struck by the sheer number of commentaries written by men. Nothing wrong with that! Yet, the focus is very often on doctrine and historical details. Nothing wrong with that either; the doctrine of the virgin birth is essential to our Christian faith! However, I found myself seeking a feminine voice and two unexpected companions joined me. One was the voice of mother, writer and sometime theologian, Sarah Clarkson (who happened to be a former student at Wycliffe!) and the other, a poet she introduced me to through her blog; Denise Levertov and her poem *Annunciation*. Hence, I have sat with Scripture at the centre and alongside insights from Clarkson and Levertov. Levertov open her poem with reference to the many sacred paintings that depict the Annunciation created down the ages and supremely enables the story of Mary's 'yes' to yield richness and depth. As she gives expression to Mary's 'yes' she challenges our own yes's..... or no's!

The Question

The request presented to Mary is by an angel, not a prophet, not in a dream, not through a burning bush, not even via Zoom! An angel; a visitor with a question of life or death....

The Pause

She has a choice, we often contemplate Mary's choice as we reflect on this account. And choice is 'integral to humanness' Levertov observes. And in this very human moment 'God waited'.

The Yes!

Her 'yes' as Clarkson says, is 'no naïve, overawed half answer'. Far from it. Her 'yes' manifests intelligence and compassion. Profound qualities. Intelligence lay in her keen sight, for the Hebrew Scriptures were ingrained within her. She made the connections with her mind as well as the eyes of her heart. The words in our Samuel reading would have revealed a familiar theme '*your house and your kingdom shall be made sure, your throne shall be established forever*' (1 Samuel 7 v 16). In saying yes she was hastening in God's coming kingdom. She exuded compassion as she shared herself, welcoming into herself 'the redemptive intent' (Clarkson) and overshadowing of God's power and presence.

Our response

One of the greatest challenges that arises out of Levertov's poetic words is the call to consider what annunciation 'of one sort or another' awaits us. Scripture is peppered with such callings to God's people. Challenged as we are at this time, dislocated from family, friends, physical worship, familiarity.....nonetheless the question emerges and God asks. His loving call to us penetrates our own unique self and context..... How will we respond? Your will be changed? or your will be done? Will we assent with our whole self; mind engaged, heart filled, body prepared, spirit quickened, or will, as Levertov notes, the gates to the question close and the pathway of the request vanish?

The Poem

I close with the words of Denise's Annunciation poem.....

“We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering, whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage.

The engendering Spirit did not enter her without consent.
God waited.

She was free to accept or to refuse, choice integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?

Some unwillingly undertake great destinies, enact them in sullen pride, uncomprehending.

More often those moments when roads of light and storm open from darkness in a man or woman, are turned away from

in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

She had been a child who played, ate, slept like any other child—but unlike others, wept only for pity, laughed in joy not triumph.

Compassion and intelligence fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous than any in all of Time, she did not quail, only asked a simple, ‘How can this be?’ and gravely, courteously, took to heart the angel’s reply, the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb Infinite weight and lightness; to carry in hidden, finite inwardness, nine months of Eternity; to contain in slender vase of being, the sum of power—in narrow flesh, the sum of light.

Then bring to birth, push out into air, a Man-child needing, like any other, milk and love—

but who was God.

This was the moment no one speaks of, when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,
Spirit, suspended,
waiting.

She did not cry, ‘I cannot. I am not worthy,’ Nor, ‘I have not the strength.’ She did not submit with gritted teeth, raging,

coerced.
Bravest of all humans, consent illumined her.

The room filled with its light, the lily glowed in it, and the iridescent wings.

Consent, courage unparalleled, opened her utterly.

AMEN