

ADVENT 4 Year B 2020

At first reading, the Old Testament passage seems a curious pairing with Luke's beautiful account of the Annunciation. The question of building a 'house for the Lord' was a preoccupation for David, but it was his son Solomon who eventually raised a temple of splendour, which occupied Mount Zion in various forms until its utter destruction by the Romans in 70AD. Yet in fact we are led on a journey by the combining of these two readings to consider the fact that encounter with God can't be limited to a single building or place. Yes, we may certainly find it easier sometimes to sit in a building like Holy Trinity and to feel God's presence, yet exploring these readings together, the radiance of the Annunciation account calls us to know that we ourselves are temples of the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor 6: 19*) - God abides in great love, but the work can only begin when we respond to this knowledge.

Luke draws us to know that our faith is relational. God's desire for us is so extraordinary because of its plainness and simplicity, its humbleness and – above all – its **RELEVANCE** to you and me. The Gospel writer reveals that Mary's 'yes' is directly linked not only to the divine but to each of **us** here in this building, those online, and indeed for all. That response by Mary is one which she speaks for the whole human race.

The history and destiny of humanity has led to this one moment in time and space. Humanity – held in the mind of God since before time began, **each one of us** held in the mind of God since before time began, has now reached this point a moment when a young girl says 'yes.'

Some would no doubt feel that I am being fanciful in saying such things. How? - others would ask- when we see the staggering images of the universe which humankind has been able to achieve through the Hubble and Spitzer Space Telescopes and the Chandra x-ray observatory, and to learn more and more of its wonders and deep secrets – how can it be possible in that vastness beyond our comprehension for God to touch our lives? And yet, for me, seeing those very images and humanity's efforts to search out such secrets reveals the power, joy and majesty, but above all, the force of **LOVE** which God shows to us all; in that force of creation, what God reveals above all else is the **LOVE** of the creator. The rationalist seeks out the so-called 'God' particle in order try to explain all, and yet merely scrapes the edges of God's creation.

For people of faith, this seeking out the secrets of our universe, whilst laudable, merely teeters at the edges of the greater reality, because it is, of course, through **faith** that we comprehend that **fuller** understanding of true reality open to all.

It is by opening the clay shuttered doors of our own hearts and minds that we are drawn into the richness of understanding faith.....each of us will have different ways of doing that and I know that for some it is difficult indeed. Yet, as Anselm, the eleventh century Archbishop of Canterbury, said (and I don't agree with some of his theology, but I do, wholeheartedly with this!)

‘I yearn to understand some measure of your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand.’

In this, Anselm does not call upon us to accept the greater reality of God’s presence in our lives unquestioningly, but with a whole-hearted openness.

Mary opens her heart to God’s outpouring of love. Not unquestioningly. *‘How can this be,’* she asks, *‘seeing that I am a virgin?’* And it is here that God draws us closer into His love through the angel’s reply – *‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.’*

God has waited long enough and now is the time which the prophets longed for. A suitable dwelling place for God is found in Mary’s womb as He reaches out in time and space to reveal the mystery of his love through the conception of his Son. Mary’s wholeheartedness brings about the transformation of our relationship with God. *‘Let it be to me according to your word.’*

As we prepare to commemorate the birth of God’s Son - who died for each one of us to draw us to the richness of resurrection life - let us, with Mary, wholeheartedly say ‘yes’ to God so that we too may continue through the Holy Spirit to reveal His love to the world. And, lest you should think that I paint too easy a view of our faith, I recall that the reality of that stable of Bethlehem was utterly unrelated to the paintings and images which form the front of our Christmas cards, beautiful though they are.

We say ‘yes’ to God **with** Mary, not only for ourselves, but for those who live in abject poverty throughout the world, for the abused children and elderly within our own society, for oppressed men, women and children suffering in so many places, for those afflicted by this ghastly Covid pandemic; you can fill in the gaps. We say ‘yes’ to God for the world.

Through Mary’s ‘yes,’ **love** came down at Christmas – for you and me and for the whole of humanity and through her, the possibility of our ‘yes’ was also brought about.

2 Samuel 7.1-11,16

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.' Nathan said to the king, 'Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.'

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?' Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

Romans 16.25-end

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.



Luke 1.26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 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 will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.' 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.

Annunciation (1623) Orazio Gentileschi - Galleria Sabauda, Turin