

18 December 2011

Advent 4B

Sermon notes:

Luke 1.26-38

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The story of the birth of Jesus, as told in Matthew and in Luke, includes, of course, the statement that Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary, a virgin. This is no small distraction to modern readers and, indeed, is such a distraction that most of the rest of the details of Jesus' birth are read almost without comment. And so, because we tend to focus on the problem of the means of conception, Mary gets fairly short-shrift when we consider a reading like that of the Annunciation today – particularly in Protestant circles. Mary is easily reduced to being somewhat instrumental – not instrumental in the sense of being critical to the story, but in the sense of being a mere instrument, and not an active agent, in the story. *Someone* has to bear Jesus, and it just happened to be the girl Mary.

I want to focus, however, on the response of Mary to the extraordinary visit from Gabriel and the news he brings. In addition to the news of the extraordinary conception, at least two more things are striking in the story. The first is the recurrence of the word "will".

"...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 forever... 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..." The archangel even concludes with a somewhat unexpected, "For nothing *will* be impossible with God." (NRSV)

This little word is here simply a reference to the future, and not an insistent you *will* do this and this and be subject to that and that. It is simply a statement of fact: this is what it going to happen. Gabriel does not need to insist that this is going to happen because the one who sent him has simply determined that this is going to be the case.

This being the case, the second striking thing is Mary's final remark, with which the encounter ends: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" or, to translate it a little more strongly, Here am I, the *slave* of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word". Here we meet in the story a second offence to the modern mind. If the first offence is the account of the virginal conception the second offence is the violation of Mary with the declaration that this is what is going to happen to her, followed by her seemingly weak acquiesce to this news.

We have already heard one poem today reflecting on the Mary's response to this call of God in which, we might say, Mary features as a believer.¹ Another poetic reflection, which states the offence at the archangel's visit, has recently been penned by John Lindley, "Annunciation":²

You come with your bad news ticking in
your mouth,
fan the giant brag of your wings,
open your 'nothing up my sleeve' hands
and magic her a gift that must be paid for.

You find her where she'd not be found –
in the shadow of betrothal,
declare her the chosen vessel for the
chosen one
and lodge a weight in her womb that
grows like rumour.

Ever after she might tell this tale,
truthfully, sheepishly to all who'll listen:
how feathers fell from the sky in the
shape of a man,
how he spoke a seed into her unopened
sex,

how, after the gentlest, most shocking of
rapes,
he left the scene of the crime
letting the white light of witchcraft
confetti down on her from above.

Here there is no "behold, the handmaid of the Lord" but what we might call the violation of Mary's freedom, what is the "most shocking of rapes," even if it is also "the gentlest" of such violations. Now, the point is not that we should take offence at the force of Lindley's language here, but that he identifies a fundamental

¹ **Mary's Song, Luci Shaw: "Blue homespun and the bend of my breast..."; see, among other sites, <http://www.intervarsity.org/studentsoul/item/mary-song>**

² *A reflection on Daniel Bonnell's painting "Annunciation"*
http://web.me.com/danielbonnell/Site_2/Painting_13.html ; for more on Lindley and his prize-winning poem, see <http://iocproject.ning.com/forum/topics/the-poetry-of-john-lindley>

problem we have with this story – that Mary says, Yes. It does not, of course, quite matter whether she says yes or not; Gabriel has already declared that this is what is going to happen. Mary's role in God's next big thing has already been determined: you *will* conceive in your womb and bear a son. This, Lindley suggests, is a "gift that must be paid for".

Mary's situation is what we might properly call a "mysterious" one – for she is both not free and free at the same time. She is not free because here God is sovereign and not she. But she is also free to declare herself servant, or slave, or else to do what Jonah did and kick and struggle all the way. It is possible, of course, to invoke a bit of pop psychology and to speculate that since Mary herself was sure that what was declared would happen was indeed going to happen, it would be in her best interests simply to "go with the flow" and not put up pointless resistance before an irresistible force, and that this is precisely what she did. But we would rightly find that to be a weak response on Mary's part – better to live a life raging against the machine than being reduced to a piece of flotsam tossed to and fro by the tide; is this not precisely what Jesus did in persisting on the path to the cross?

All of this, however, is really pretty abstract if Mary's situation is not also, in some way, also our own – if her being both free and not free at the same time, and making a choice in that situation, is not also our own condition. Our offence at Mary's apparent loss of freedom derives from our sense that we *are* free, that we are ultimately no one's handmaid or servant or slave. If someone were to come to us and declare that "this is what is going to happen", like it or not, the typical modern response would likely be great offence – surely something like this is undemocratic, un-American, or un-Australian. Surely I do not have to give in to that?

And yet, the current silly season is telling in this connection. We are, of course, all "free" in relation to the demands of Christmas, and yet somehow we also seem to be extraordinarily un-free. For it is Christmas, the angels tell us, and you will endeavour to meet with every person you know before December 25, for surely the world will end on Boxing Day. You will eat too much, and drink too much, and endure the company of relatives you only see once a year, and for good reason. You will spend more money than you have, because this is what it means to be generous, and the economy desperately needs it. Because in fact the world will not end on Boxing Day you will gather in droves for the post-Christmas sales, for surely what you bought last Boxing Day is now in need of replacement. You will then desert the cities for the holiday destinations and sit in traffic and wait in

supermarket queues in usually sleepy seaside villages rather than in the city. And so on.

This, of course, might seem all a very cynical way of putting it, but cynicism is not the point. The point is that even if we object to Mary's exercise of her freedom in her willingness to be bound by what God says will happen, whether at this time of the year with its particular demands on us or any other "normal" time and the demands it makes, we are as much addressed by the angels – or the demons – of our day with declarations of what is going to overshadow us, of what we are going to have to bear, and of what we will name it to be. You are a democracy, and so your politicians will do all they can to denigrate each other and ingratiate themselves with you who vote. You are a capitalist society, and so the invisible hand will be your salvation whether you are rich or poor. You are young, and so you will be society's great hope; you are not-so-young, and so you will be held responsible for the mess we are in.

Mary's response to the claim God has made on her life is "...let it be with me according to your word". This is not what we say to those onerous demands made of us by the ghosts in the machines of our society and yet, for the most part, we continue to be *subject* to those demands, even as we value and proclaim our freedom. And so there is for us a continual tension – the desire to be free, but being subject to something which denies that freedom and so creates the dissonance of unfulfilled desires, in the very midst of the promise that we will be fulfilled. For this promise is no small part of our society: just acquire this or that, do this or that, and all will be fulfilled. And yet it is not. The problem is that these visions of the future are hollow, or shallow, or thin. They are not in accord with what we are and with what we need. And so for all that they might promise, and for all the conviction with which we might say "Yes", they do not deliver.

But what God speaks to Mary is different. God lays before her not one of a range of possibilities, but the only thing by which Mary will truly become herself. For when God calls – or promises – it is not an external thing which meets us as strangers to the one who calls, somehow added to what we already are. When God calls, he creates us, calls into being things which do not yet properly exist, calls to "life" that which is "dead". When God addresses Mary through Gabriel what God says is effectively, "Mary, here you are." And Mary says, "Yes, there I am; let it be with me according to your word."

By comparison, this dynamic is much more important than the question of whether or not Mary was a virgin. The impossibility of a virginal conception is just a sign for a deeper

impossibility: that we might hear a call – a declaration of our future – which offends our very sense of self, and yet which in fact promises us ourselves quite simply because our sense of self is wrong-headed. For we are the piecing-together of various calls and promises and hopes continually declared by the angels and demons of the world around us which have only half made us and so have left us both satisfied that we have what we want, and yet still wanting.

What we see in Mary is someone who hears a call which defines her and to which she says Yes, not out of resignation but because the one who spoke the word could be trusted: here is a promise which will be delivered, the evidence of which is her very condition as a young girl who ought not to be conceiving a child.

Mary's response is the response of the disciple who hears of a coming healing, and agrees to be a part of the means by which it does come because she believes that, by the power of the one who calls her, she can be.

Her response is the response God seeks of all of us, variously called and promised our own part in God's work, and so variously assured that we can fulfil that part:

the Holy Spirit *will* come upon you, and the power of the Most High *will* overshadow you, and you *will* be made holy, be reconceived,

that you might take your up part in the unending kingdom of him whose own beginning was just like this,

that he might become our end.

The one who calls us is faithful, and will do as he promises.

Let it, then, be with us according to God's word, that this season and all our seasons might be full and rich with the humanity for which we were created.

Amen.