

## The Fourth Sunday of Advent: Mary's Greeting

**Readings: Romans 16:25-27; Magnificat; Luke 1:26-38**

It's the time of the year for 'Season's greetings'. Well, isn't it *always* a time for greeting? Greeting neighbours or strangers is as old as human history. Though perhaps this season we're especially missing familiar forms of greeting, like handshakes and kisses, that are out of order.

But we can still always greet one another with *words*. What words? Suppose you meet somebody you know in the street, what would you say ...? ('Hello'? or 'Hi' or 'Good morning' or 'How are you?' - and the person you met would probably say something similar.) I guess neither you nor they would be likely to say, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'

But that's the greeting a teenage girl in Nazareth gets when a stranger appears to her. And the greeting sets in motion this beautiful story told by St Luke. That annunciation has been pictured by artists thousands of times. On one side of the picture the humble, pious virgin; on the other a magnificent heavenly angel; behind them a luxuriant garden; above them perhaps some representation of the Spirit of God. A picture of wonder and glory, of beauty and tranquillity.

And not only the artists; the poets too:

The angel and the girl are met. ...  
See, they have come together, see,  
While the destroying minutes flow,  
Each reflects the other's face  
Till heaven in hers and earth in his  
Shine steady there. ...  
... through the endless afternoon  
These neither speak nor movement make,  
But stare into their deepening trance  
As if their gaze would never break.

*(from Edwin Muir, 'The Annunciation')*

But is this meeting of Gabriel and Mary really as peaceful, as timeless as that? Just imagine I walk in while you're doing your homework and say 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' What would you think? How would you feel? ...

Yes, you could well be *alarmed*. As, unsurprisingly, was Mary. 'She was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.' In fact, she was probably terrified.

There's a rather unconventional annunciation picture by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century painter Lorenzo Lotto which shows Mary facing away from the amazingly beautiful angel; she's holding up her hands, perhaps in prayer but perhaps in horror. We know a miracle is happening: the artist even shows God up in the sky. But it's an unnerving scene; and right in the middle of the picture a tabby cat streaks across the floor in terror.



Terror ... Yet, as St Luke tells the story, the angel says, 'Don't be afraid, Mary'. He goes on to announce that Mary will have a child and that child will be a king and be called God's Son. Which is hardly less weird and perplexing; not least because, as Mary says, she's a virgin. That's not the point, says the angel, for God's Holy Spirit will come upon you; and nothing is impossible with God.

Any less perplexed, Mary? Come to that, do you understand what's going on, or how this will happen? Do I? Mary could have dismissed Gabriel's announcement or declined it: 'Look, sir, I'm just the carpenter's fiancé, go and look for somebody else.' But no. Mary says, 'Here am I ... let it be.'

That is a massive 'Yes', a great 'Amen' to a future she cannot comprehend. 'Yes' to bearing a child who is the Word of God, living in her flesh and in ours. And so a few centuries later the Church gave Mary the Greek title *Theotokos*, which means Bearer of God, or even Mother of God.

Mary's 'bearing' involves far more than she could imagine, far more *labour*. Literally, the labour of carrying this new life for nine months; the labour of giving birth; the labour of nurturing her son. And *he too* is a bearer – bearer of good news, of healing and of hope; bearer also of pain and death, when a sword pierces his mother's soul. To all this, without knowing its course or its weight, she says, 'Yes, Amen, let it be.'

And so do we, as bearers with Mary and Jesus of the Word of God. That is the gift we shall shortly receive in Holy Communion, the divine life which we bear into the world – as St Paul put it, always bearing in our bodies the death of Jesus. Like Mary, without fully understanding what we are to receive or what we are to bear, we nevertheless say 'Amen' to the divine gift.

Mary's 'Let it be' is often read as a sign of 'feminine' submission and obedience. But not at all. It's bold, and it's world-changing. After this event in Luke's Gospel comes her visit to Elizabeth and her song which we call 'Magnificat': that exuberant poem sung daily in the Church's Evening Prayer, and sung for us this morning after Communion.

Listen to her words. The Magnificat is all about *rejoicing*: 'My soul magnifies the Lord ... all generations will call me blessed.' But it's also all about *reversal* and change: 'He has put down the mighty and exalted the meek; he has filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty.' What Mary bears and we bear, what she and we rejoice in, is not for the sake of a 'deepening trance', but for a world transformed into a just order – what her son calls 'the kingdom of God'.

Or what St Paul calls (as we heard earlier) 'the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed'. Yes, but still there is *more* of the mystery to disclose, more of the labour to bear, more of the joy to sing. And though we know the beginning of the story and live in the middle of it, we don't know the end. So like Mary, we say 'Yes' without fully understanding. Perhaps in perplexity, perhaps in reluctance, 'Amen' to the Body of Christ; 'Amen' to the words of the Creed.

But that unknowing, hopeful 'Yes' is precisely the heart of *faith*. So let us stand to declare it boldly ...

*Christopher Burdon*