

Home Retreat Talk – Dec 19th 2020

The Annunciation



The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, "rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you." She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, "Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus."

In many paintings and icons of the Annunciation, like the one by fra. Angelico in the priory of San Marco in Florence, the angel kneels before Mary, seated with a scroll or book on her lap, the Word of God. Mary, meditating on the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, is ready to listen to the message of the angel and to respond, "I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me."

This fits in with the tradition that, as a young girl, Mary was presented in the Temple by Anna and Joachim, her parents, symbolizing her complete dedication to the Lord.

In other paintings, as the angel appears before her, Mary protectively crosses her hands over her womb as she conceives the Son of the Most High God. The moment of her response to the angel signifying the start of the Incarnation. The Church celebrates the feast of the Annunciation on the 25th of March, exactly nine months before Christmas Day, to emphasize that the Child is to have a human birth, to enter the world as a tiny baby. There is an ancient tradition that the creation of the world and the commencement and conclusion of the Redemption all happen to coincide at the vernal equinox.

St Paul says, "at the fulness of time, God sent his son, born of a woman." The arrival of Jesus signaled the "fulness of time." Jesus did not come to earth as a spirit. He truly became one of us, receiving his human nature from Our Lady's Immaculate womb. When God created the first man, he took care to make a fitting environment for him - the garden of Eden. When, in the fulness of time, God sent his Son, the Christ, he likewise prepared a worthy environment, the body and soul of the Virgin Mary.

The divine nature and the human were united in a single person: Jesus Christ, true God and true man, the only begotten and eternal Son of the Father, and from that moment on, the true son of Mary. That is why we honour her with the title Mother of God. How many times do we pray, "holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners..."

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us... For God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son." The whole history of salvation represents God's reaching out to his beloved creatures. Right from the beginning of time, God has been encouraging mankind to draw close to him. The Incarnation, Christmas Day, is the culmination of this message. The annunciation celebrates that moment in history when Emmanuel, God with us, became a man like us in all things but sin. It is the mystery of the enormous love that God has for each one of us.

The angel greets Mary: "Hail, full of grace, hail, so highly favoured" He calls her this rather than by her proper name, Mary (Myriam). Why does the angel greet her in this way? In the language of the bible, "grace" means a special gift which comes from God. By changing her name in this way God destines her to something new, gives her a mission to fulfill: she is to become the Mother of God. It would be the key to her whole existence. Each time we pray the Angelus prayer, we are reminded of this unique moment in history.

Often a comparison is made between the doubting of Zechariah at the angel's announcement in the Temple and our Lady's ready response to say yes, even though she cannot fully understand the implications, cannot see how she can remain a virgin and yet give birth to God's Son. "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 called Holy, the Son of God." Mary listens. She ponders in her heart. She freely commits herself to God's will for her, her vocation.

Vocation is not so much the choice or choices that we make. It is the way God communicates to us through the thousand and one events in which we are involved. We have to try to interpret these circumstances in the light of faith, as Mary did. We need to be ready to meet the Lord when he comes. That is what Advent is all about. Perhaps Mary was not pondering the Scriptures when the message came. Perhaps she was cleaning the house or baking bread... whatever she was doing she was ready. She was waiting. We need to do the same.

St Benedict says that for Monks, life should be a continuous Lent. I wonder if it could also be said that it should be a continuous Advent. Advent is about waiting, waiting for the Lord to come:

Advent is the spirituality of John the Baptist, waiting all those long years in the wilderness before he could finally say, "behold the lamb of God!" Waiting, misunderstood and finally arrested and put to death, but constant, faithful, the Elijah who prepared the way of the Lord.

Advent is the spirituality of Mary, Mary prepared from her youth to respond to God's will. Mary waiting to see if the message of the Angel would be fulfilled, then waiting for the birth of her son, patiently wondering what this child would be, destined for the fall and rising of many... a sign to be rejected... Mary waiting at the tomb in sorrow... waiting, in hope, with the apostles in the upper room for the Spirit to come.

Advent is the spirituality of all those who offer prayer and praise to God in the early morning, in the dead of night, who wait for their prayers to be answered, not knowing but believing, not seeing but hoping, who join all those who, down the ages, have heard the prophecies and know that God is faithful.

The angel told Mary not to be afraid. The same is addressed to us as we face our vocation, our future, as Mary did. Vocation is not a static thing, a job or a position. It is dynamic. It is about trying to put the will of God into practice in my life, in my circumstances, day by day. We fear the unknown. Yet we are told, "do not be afraid." Do not be afraid to become a mother. Do not be afraid of the responsibilities of being married. Do not be afraid to become a priest. Do not be afraid to share what you have. Do not be afraid to stand up for what is right, to challenge those who make mistakes, to forgive those who wrong you... Do not be afraid.

May the Lord reward our waiting with the fulfilment of his presence, as he did for the Virgin Mary. May our prayers help those, who wait in darkness and in the shadow of death, for the dawn of God's splendor to dwell in all our hearts, that we may be shown to be children of light and heirs to the promise of God.

May we have the grace to listen, as Mary did, to the will of God, and the courage to put it into practice.

V. The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary,
R. And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.

Hail Mary, etc...

V. Behold the handmaid of the Lord.
R. Be it done unto me according to Your Word.

Hail Mary, etc...

V. And the Word was made flesh,
R. And dwelt among us.

Hail Mary, etc...

V. Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.
R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray:

Pour forth, we beseech You, O Lord,
Your Grace into our hearts;
that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ your Son,
was made known by the message of an angel,
may, by His passion and cross,
be brought to the glory of His Resurrection.
Through the same Christ, our Lord.

Amen.