

Advent 1 – Angel and annunciation (by Richard Blundel)

Luke 1:26-38 (NRSVA)

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.



The Angel Gabriel knitted by Sarah Lacey

Reflection

'In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, with a message for a girl betrothed to a man named Joseph ...'

What comes to our minds on re-reading these familiar words, late in the grim (lockdown) Autumn of 2020? For me, it's their unique status in the four Gospel accounts, where Mary is located centre stage. The Gospel according to Mark jumps straight into the world of John the Baptist. Following its opening verses, the Gospel according to John takes a similar course. In Matthew, the narrative begins with Joseph, to whom an angel of the Lord appears in a dream. Joseph's encounter with an angel takes place somewhat later than Mary's – he's already heard that the young woman to whom he is betrothed is with child – and while it's apparent that his actions are based on the best of intentions, we only get to witness this momentous event from his perspective. I'm also struck by the stark contrast between details that might appear rather ordinary – mundane even – and the most profound mysteries of our faith. I wonder if this everyday aspect may be less obvious to us as a result of our familiarity with the text, and perhaps it's also somewhat obscured by the great artistic representations of the Annunciation. This disparity becomes more apparent if the opening lines are translated to a more local context (e.g. 'In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Gloucestershire called Nailsworth ...'), and at once you realise that these verses contain no visual imagery. On the contrary, they are pared down and almost entirely taken up by the record of a dialogue – albeit one involving a young woman from an obscure regional market town ... and an angel. Yet crucially, by concluding with Mary's own words, this unlikely exchange acknowledges her voice and agency.

Prayer

Dear Lord, at the beginning of this new and especially challenging Advent season, may we take our time to listen afresh to the familiar words that evoke the coming of Christ to the world. Help us to find the necessary space and the quiet, and to give our full attention to the profound mysteries that they contain. Amen

Readings for the week

Monday 30 November

Psalm 79
Micah 4:1-5
Revelation 15:1-8

Tuesday 1 December

Psalm 79
Micah 4:6-13
Revelation 18:1-10

Wednesday 2 December

Psalm 79
Micah 5:1-5a
Luke 21:34-38

Thursday 3 December

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
Hosea 6:1-6
1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Friday 4 December

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Acts 11:19-26

Saturday 5 December

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
Ezekiel 36:24-28
Mark 11:27-33