

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Services on 6th December 2009

Luke 1:25-38 - "Nothing is impossible"

I wonder whether you are pre-conditioned to think that when it comes to Christmas we automatically enter the pantomime season and the Christmas story, with its angels and shepherds, all mixed up with Aladdin and Mother Goose who begat Widow Twanky who begat Rudolf the red nosed reindeer. And we're not quite sure where – but somewhere in this mythical winter wonderland – Jesus is supposed to fit in... And they all lived happily ever after.

Part of the value of studying Luke's account of the Christmas story is that he is very clear that we are in the realm of history here. It was Luke's claim as he began his gospel that he only used eyewitness sources and archives, because he wanted his readers to be sure of the events they were reading about. And it is implied in the first verse of today's reading. ²⁶***In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.***

Notice the timing of this episode: 'in the sixth month...'. Luke is linking this with the previous incident in which Elisabeth, Mary's cousin, became pregnant. It is his way of putting a date in the margin, to make quite clear that this amazing event actually occurred.

Ditto the place names and the people's names. You can plot the space/time co-ordinates of the incident: it actually happened.

It's important for us to take this on board, because too often we give the impression that our Christian faith is anything but historical. We allow the events which gave rise to Christianity to be relegated to the level of pious fairy tales: Once upon a time in Nazareth. Or at least they become detached from reality in some way.

I had a quick rummage through my nobby guide to art and I found no fewer than 5 paintings of the Annunciation – the Angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary – the scene we are considering today. There they were, absolutely beautiful work, complete with spectacular pillars and colonnades and formal gardens, every bit of furniture encrusted with gold, every snapshot of Mary giving the impression she's comfortably over the age of 30; one of them had peacocks, doves, oriental carpets, peeping toms and the angel was being vetted by a bishop on his way through to see Mary. I'm not wanting to rubbish that – you could argue that the aim was a good aim, to present the scene in a way that showed its relevance to the time of the artist.

But it does mean that we need to set aside our inherited assumptions about what happened and look more carefully at Luke's account – if you like, to peel off the many layers of paint to get closer to the real story of the real girl – and the real meaning of it all. What was it about

this angelic announcement, this heavenly newflash, that makes it such urgent listening for us all?

I want to answer that question in three ways this morning.

For a start **it was a message of God's grace...** -

1. A message of God's grace.

This was an announcement of God' favour and kindness and love to Mary and to countless others beyond her – it was news of God's grace.

Look how the angel puts it when he first speaks to her in verse 28: ***The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured!"***

And that isn't a message from her fiancé – to accompany a bunch of red roses... 'Greetings to you Mary, highly favoured by Joseph'. The angel makes it clear that she is favoured **by God: 'The Lord is with you.'**

Apart from everything else, that note of reassurance was important because to be greeted by an angel is apparently always scary – so Gabriel has to re-emphasise that his announcement is a message of grace... Let me read on from verse 29 ²⁹***Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*** ³⁰***But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God..."***

I think we forget how lucky we are that God's normal way of speaking to us is through people proclaiming the Bible – not through angels. Perhaps we feel that it is a struggle to muster the enthusiasm to listen to preachers; but if it was the angel Gabriel speaking, our problem would be to summon up the **courage** to listen. In one sense this message straight from the press office in heaven ought to have be terrifying.

Do you imagine that when God speaks it is easy-listening? It shouldn't be so: it should be awesome, even terrifying, given the way by nature we all ignore God and resist him. How can God have anything to do with us? The answer throughout the Bible is always the same: it is simply a matter of God's grace.

Now obviously these words are said first and foremost to Mary and they speak of the amazing privilege she had in bringing Christ into the world. But notice that they do not say that she had this privilege because she was uniquely worthy and uniquely holy – simply that she uniquely was chosen by God for this task.

So the point is not that Mary can **give** grace and **dispense** it – but that she has **received** it. In Roman Catholicism there is a prayer to Mary which begins with a patchwork quilt of verses from the Gospels. Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed art thou among women, blessed is the fruit of thy womb. That much is pure Scripture, though admittedly when the angels said 'Hail, Mary!' it was a greeting, not a prayer. But the prayer goes on rather differently: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and especially at the hour of death...'

Those are ideas which are added on to Scripture and change the picture: as always when you go beyond the Bible, you distort it. The idea here is not that because of her position she can bring God's favour to the world. No: in bringing Jesus into the world – this immense

privilege for her – the initiative and plan behind it all was God's. It all started from him and his grace.

Incidentally it is always the same when God uses people. If someone is privileged to be used by God in some way, it's not his intention for them to puff their chest out to take the medals – we need to remember when we happen to be used that we are not doing God a favour. It is simply the favour and kindness of God that he involves us in his plans.

So the message actually moves quickly away from Mary and fastens on Jesus – because he is the one who is the focus of all the ages of history in God's news of grace. Look at it in verse 31: ***You will be with child and give birth to a son,*** (so far so good – nothing too amazing in that perhaps – but then the extraordinary description begins) ***'and you are to give him the name Jesus (that means, literally, God saves).³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'***

What is it that lies behind God's great rescue plan, which will come to fruition in Jesus? It is his grace... From Jacob onwards, God's special love has been gathering a people; from David onwards, God has promised a great king to rule over his people.

'And', says the angel, 'God's grace won't be like a well which runs dry. This baby will have a kingdom which lasts forever'.

I guess most of us know that song 'Stairway to heaven' by Led Zeppelin. The lyrics are pretty obscure, I'm afraid: 'There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold and she's buying the stairway to heaven.' But after 5 minutes of double Dutch, and one or two tasty guitar bits along the way, we are no clearer whether she has made it.

And if we try to create a stairway to heaven, to climb up to God by trying hard to please him, we are missing the point. Our efforts will never get us to God: if they could, why ever would Jesus have come that first Christmas – and why would he have gone to the cross to die for our sins. The brilliant news is that in Jesus Christ God has let down a stairway from heaven which reaches to us – all because of his grace... If there is nothing else we learn let's take hold of that: God can be gracious to us, even though we don't deserve it – and Jesus Christ proves it.

The second aspect of the message Mary heard is this: **it was a message of God's power;** that emerges in verses 34-37. ***"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"***

³⁵The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^{a]} the Son of God. ³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God."

When Mary asks 'How will this be?' it seems to be a response of faith. She does not doubt the possibility of it, but its performance. How will this be, given that in the language of verse 27 she's a virgin, pledged to be married? The answer lies in the power of God: That's the

only way of getting beyond the bounds of human possibility. As verse 37 puts it: ***For nothing is impossible with God.***"

So the angel's message makes clear to her that this birth is going to be one for which Joseph can take no credit: he is not involved. ***"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."***

Now it has become characteristic to pour scorn on this teaching of the virgin birth and the most common way of doing so is to say that it is a myth – a fable which was no part of the original story but which has been wheeled in from a century later to explain the divinity of Jesus. 'Look', people say, 'When the Gods of Ancient Greece couldn't keep their passion under control, they used to go and pair off with beautiful human women. The end product was something part-human and part-divine. Isn't this story a legend like that?'

But you only have to look for a moment at verse 35 to realise how different this is. The crude Greek myths went into all the lurid details. But there is no carnal passion here: Luke is very reticent. The language of sexual union with Mary is absent. Instead the sacred intimacy of Jesus' conception is reported with perfect delicacy. ***"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."***

That's two ways of saying the same thing in slightly different words, and it's meant to remind us of the way at Creation, way back in Genesis 1 verse 2, the Holy Spirit was hovering over the waters, the power of God overshadowing them, to bring creation to birth. 'Well', says the angel, 'This birth will be the result of the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowing you, hovering over you.' God is starting all over again – with Adam mark 2 – only where the first Adam failed, this human being will succeed. He'll be the head of a new family in a new creation.

Perhaps we think this sort of talk is impossible? Well it all depends on what sort of God you believe in... If you believe in the sort of God who has power; then what the angel says is true: nothing is impossible with God. Normally God's power is at work to run the world in a predictable orderly way – we call it the laws of nature. God is the one who set those laws up and God is the one who keeps things operating that way. That in itself is a work of God's power; but he is free and able to change those rules if he chooses to.

That's why the angel mentions Elizabeth, Mary's cousin: she ***'is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month'***. I know that a miraculous birth in old age is not quite in the same league as the ***virgin*** birth Mary was going to experience. But in principle they are both demonstrations of the power of God – the God of the impossible...

It's a lovely reversal of human values here... In our newspapers we put the important people on the front pages, the people who command armies and so on – and the birth columns are held back to page 27 in very small print. Even a treasure like Joshua Biggs!

Here that is reversed: and on the opening page of Luke's account – before he has even mentioned the Roman emperor, Heaven's press office is giving coverage to the birth of two babies in a dingy old corner of an occupied nation. And that is where the power really is located. What hope that can give us for our world, and for our own lives if we have stopped believing that we can ever be the people God wants us to be? Remember that nothing is

impossible with God – the God of Jesus miraculous birth and the God of Jesus victory over death. This is a message of God's power.

There is one final aspect of the message which I want to highlight here: It's a message of God's grace and a message of God's power. But it also a message which demands a response. And Mary's remarkable response is in verse 38: **"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then (and not before) the angel left her.**

As I said, it is a remarkable response. No doubt there were questions about how it would happen. No doubt there were fears about the future: pregnancies outside marriage were punishable by stoning under the Old Testament law.

And even though that wasn't enforced, she would certainly suffer reproach and shame – perhaps nobody would believe her story – maybe she'd lose the man she loved, Joseph. Sure it was a great privilege; but there was a great cost too... And yet humbly and submissively this young teenage girl says: 'I'm prepared to do any task, as the Lord's slave. God's said it; that settles it – may it be to me as you have said'.

And that is the response that God's word demands from every one of us here: 'I'll be what you want me to be; I'll do what you want me to do; I'll go where you want me to go.' That is the sort of response that the message from heaven demanded of Mary; that is the sort of person God can use.

And if we want to be the sort of church God will use, then we mustn't balk at his demands. There may well be a great cost in submitting to God's word; but if your Christianity costs you nothing, then you know exactly how much it is worth: nothing. Mary accepted the cost and gave the message the response it demanded. Let's be sure we do the same.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)