

The Annunciation

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

December 20, 2020

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Psalm 89

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Not long after I was ordained deacon in the Church of England, I stood before the bishop, along with a group of other freshly minted deacons, and received instruction on this new life we had entered into. The bishop explained in detail what the church expected of us. At the end of his speech he asked us, "Now, are you ready?"

It felt like a rhetorical question, which we should have answered with an emphatic "yes". Instead, the bishop was met with an awkward silence, as we tried hard to convince ourselves in that moment that we were indeed ready, willing and able to carry out the bishop's instruction. Eventually, one of the braver deacons replied, "No, actually I don't feel ready." To which the bishop replied, "of course you aren't ready. But God sends you anyway!"

That's how it works: God sends him and her and me and you, to carry out the work of the gospel: to minister to others in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It felt humbling to feel so inadequate, so unready, especially since we had had two years full time training - in some cases three years. Why did we feel the task almost beyond us? Was it pride? After all, trained clergy are supposed to be the experts in these matters.

At the back of my mind was the thought of letting God down, of failing to reach his impossibly high standards. This thought betrayed on my part a lack of understanding of what God required of me. He had already sent Jesus Christ, so he didn't need another one to take his place. All he wanted was for me to go out and do what I could.

So, that's what I do; I go out and do what I can. When I go out, I know that God goes with me and will bless me and bless those whom I serve. It's actually a huge relief to know this, since I can stop worrying and let God do the heavy lifting. All he wants from me is my "yes".

That was all he wanted from Mary. He wanted Mary to say "yes". God sent the archangel Gabriel to Mary to ask this important question. Actually, the angel phrases the question in such a way that it sounds like a done deal. He says, "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." But at first Mary is not ready to say "yes". She asks a question - "How can this be, since I am a virgin?", which draws a more detailed reply. The exchange between the two ends with Mary's immortal words, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

When I consider this encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel, what strikes me is the enormity of what Mary is being asked to do. She is being asked to bear God's son. Wouldn't anyone's first reaction be to say "yes". Maybe, but on the other hand, wouldn't we be more likely to say, "Why me?"

Why Mary? She was chosen by God. It wasn't as though the angel was on a low level search and announce mission and stopped by the first female he saw. Mary was chosen beforehand by God. We can surmise, from her reply, that she was a person of deep faith. She already had

a relationship with God through prayer and her heart understood the implications of the angel's request. She didn't know what would follow, exactly. I mean she didn't know of the future threat of violence from Herod's soldiers, or the exile into Egypt, or of the final horror of seeing her son die on the cross. Had she known all of that, would she still have said "yes". Well, the fact is, she knew that her "yes" would mean her life, as she saw it, would change irrevocably. How would Joseph react? Her "yes" is already making life complicated.

Was she ready? Not really, but God chose *her*. The wisdom of God appears as foolishness to the world. Mary had no wealth, status or material advantages. God didn't want that - instead, God wanted someone who would love his Son with all her heart and mind and soul. He chose Mary, and she didn't say, "why me?" because she knew that God acts in the world for a reason, and that God throughout history has chosen people like Mary to carry out his will.

At her young age she has the wisdom to reply, "Let it be with me according to your word." Whatever plans she has for her own life - whatever hopes or dreams she had - are now to be given up so that she may follow God's will. That's what makes Mary special; that's why God chose her. Her faith allows her to let go of her own will and give herself over to God's will: to become the servant of the Lord.

Mary has a vitally important role to play in the story of our salvation, and not just at the birth of Jesus. She is there at the wedding at Cana, and it is through her intercession that the ministry of Jesus begins. She is present at his crucifixion and later she is with the apostles. Her presence would have been a constant reminder to them of their Lord and Savior. Here is something which isn't often remarked upon, but if you saw Mary and Jesus side by side, you would have seen his resemblance to her. After all, aren't we all a little bit like our parents? I wonder in what way Jesus was like his mother?

Unfortunately, the Church sometimes downplays Mary's importance. It's either that, or they go the other way, and put her on so high a pedestal that she no longer appears human. If you are serious about your faith - which means wanting to know Jesus and develop a close personal relationship with him - I don't think you can do that and disregard Mary at the same time. Again, I think it is a question of resemblances. How are we like Jesus? That is surely our goal, to become more Jesus-like. To this end, I would suggest that to do this we must also become more Mary-like, and learn from her story.

What we can learn from Mary is how to be a disciple; she is, arguably, the first one. Before she gives birth, Mary carries Jesus inside her. She gives Jesus love when he is born, and her love gives Jesus the growth to his own development, as a man who embodies love, to such an extent that he eventually gives up his life that ours may be saved. As a disciple Mary follows Jesus, and she is there when Jesus dies; her heart was broken on the cross. From her we learn the lesson about discipleship - that the servants of God can experience terrible suffering as well as joy.

However, it is at the annunciation that we learn how to respond to God's initiative to serve. Not with a "why me?" But with a "yes." God has chosen Mary. God may choose you? How will you answer? Listen again to what Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford