

A sermon preached by Nigel Guthrie at Holy Cross, Crediton on 18 December 2011, the fourth Sunday in Advent at the 9.30am Sung Eucharist

The Annunciation

On several days this week our hardworking postie has struggled to get all the cards through the letterbox in one go. But fortunately Tina and I love hearing from people, and perhaps as we get older it is even better to know that long time friends are fit and well and still want to keep in touch with us. We even enjoy reading the Christmas round robins, although I do find myself marking them informally – positive marks for humour or interest, negative marks for boasting about children's achievements or excessive length. I wonder if you have marking systems for such correspondence?

Although Christmas mail often contains good or bad news about others it rarely changes our lives. But sometimes a message or letter can have a profound effect. I still remember receiving my exam results and having to come to terms with the good, the bad and the ugly. Receiving the results of exams or medical tests can be seriously worrying; we have to live with the results we are sent and sometimes have to come to terms with a future which is not what we expected or hoped for.

But sometimes a message opens up a choice for us. Some of the letters and messages I remember most vividly are ones which have invited me to look at other jobs in the church. It's all right they don't exactly arrive every week! Perhaps you have received similar offers which on the one hand could open up a whole different life for you but, on the other hand, mean uprooting family and leaving good friends. Such letters can lead to a good deal of heart searching.

I wonder how Mary perceived the angel's message? Was she being told what would happen or was she being invited to cooperate with God's purposes? On the face of it, it doesn't sound as if she was given much option by the angel 'you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus'. And I must say this worries me because although I believe God calls us to be obedient, I also believe he also gives us the freedom to follow or to reject his call. And it's true that Mary does betray her astonishment and perhaps her fear about what she is learning. 'How can this be since I am a virgin?' But could Mary really have turned around to the angel and said 'no thank you, please go away'?

There are certainly some who feel that this iconic scene of the Annunciation is a damaging example within the Christian faith of male domination and control over a woman. And given the degree to which women have been sidelined in the structures and ministry of the church I can understand where they are coming from.

And it's true that in insipid popular imagery Mary often appears pale and submissive. But similar images of Jesus all too often portray him in 'the gentle Jesus meek and mild' mode of the old Sunday School song which hardly does justice to the man who turned over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple.

If we look instead at some of the beautiful medieval depictions of the annunciation we see Mary portrayed in a very different way. She often appears the equal of the angel and in the famous depiction of the scene by Fra Angelico the angel appears to be bowing before Mary who, having found God's favour, is receiving the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove directly from heaven. And in the top left hand corner of the picture we see another angel but this time driving Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden after their fall from grace. In this depiction Mary is honoured as the one, the woman, who made God's salvation in Jesus possible.

At the end of the scene we heard this morning, Mary says 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' It is only after she has spoken that the angel departs. To me that is significant. I believe that the message of the angel was certainly a call, we might even call it a command. But would that call and command have been answered without Mary's acceptance that, in all humility, she desired with all her heart to do God's will? I think not.

When we love someone we want, more than anything, to do what pleases them. When Mary heard the angel's call her love for God overruled the anxieties she had about her situation so that she could say 'yes' to her part in God's plans. Her example is one that should guide us all who follow her Son. Firstly she accepted that she had found favour with God. That must be the start of any relationship with God; to recognize that he loves us and is not out to condemn us. Secondly she listened to God's call and even though it was far fetched she didn't turn away. And thirdly she accepted God's call and determined to adapt her life to his plan.

I wonder what God might be calling us to do? Perhaps to forgive someone who has upset us? Perhaps to help someone we know who needs a listening ear? Perhaps to take on a role of responsibility within the church? Perhaps to give a lead in the community? Perhaps something completely different? Such call or commands might seem daunting but it is always worth considering them because often we can grow through answering God's challenges. But before answering them we must pause to know that we have found favour with God and that he is with us in the present, and will be with us in the future whatever that brings. The bread and wine we share here today is a promise of that favour for us.