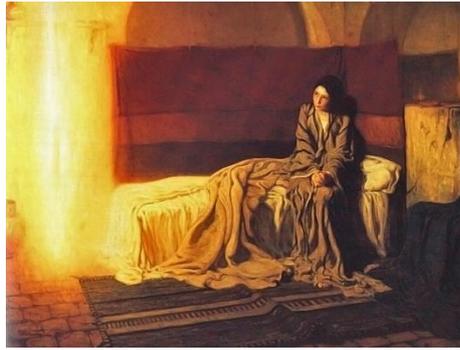


How can this be? Kay Brightley



“Why me?” Mary may well have asked. “I’m not exactly sitting here with the right credentials, Gabriel. I’m not your Dio A student, or the daughter of some flash lawyer, I’m not even model potential. Are you sure you haven’t got the wrong address? We’ve had some road works recently and the signs are down. Rachel down the road seems a far better bet (and she’s married). Is it because my fiancé has such a grand whakapapa, being related to King David? This is really inconvenient, well, actually more than that, it’s pretty shameful. I don’t think Joseph will have me now- how am I going to explain a pregnancy to him, let alone my parents, my granny is really strict. I’ll lose my job at the hairdressers and I’ve only just started my apprenticeship.” (Perhaps a bit of artistic license with the text.)

Who else is in this scene? Gabriel, one of the seven archangels, second only to Michael in the pecking order, came to Mary after his first visitation to Zechariah in the Temple when he appeared to him and announced that, despite their advanced years, he and his wife, Elizabeth were to have a child (remember the story of Hannah and Samuel). We can imagine this was good news. The weaving of the lives of Jesus and John the Baptist has begun and would not go un-noticed in the eyes of first century Christians as it was foretold in the scriptures.

There are many paintings which depict this very scene; it has a numinous hold; what was this eternal moment like for Mary? Gabriel with wings resplendent, a grand guest indeed in her humble abode. Much of the artworks portray Mary as an innocent young woman with an obedient heart; but there is more; I believe that the text allows us to see that Mary is given a moment to consent and then she has the courage so to do. She said, “How can this be?” The angel explained the mechanics but more particularly the nature of the child, Son of God. What if she had said no? Just stop for a moment and think about that. What if she had said no? Would the Holy Spirit have overshadowed her anyway, regardless of her will; I think not. I imagine that Mary was known to God throughout her life and was favoured and chosen because of her courage. God knew she would not say no. Imbued with the Spirit she would not say no.

And what of us? Are there moments of annunciation? Times when we are called to step out of the aeroplane not knowing if we have a parachute, and if we have, whether or not it will open? Moments when we just step out in trust, in blind faith, or seeing faith? Pivotal moments when, on reflection God’s hand was on us, in us, with us? Moments when we feel led by the nose.

And what of angels? Gabriel moments? Angel moments? I guess there may be as many views on angels as there are people here today? We had a beautiful representation here last week at the pageant, it brings back memories (I remember thinking at Sunday school, “If I can’t be Mary I’ll be an angel, they have the best costumes.”)

Our human minds are limited and I wonder if it is the case when we don’t understand something fully we externalize it in the form of an image. In my work I used to have a clinic for children who had a problem with encopresis (poohing in inappropriate places, particularly their pants). We used a book called “sneaky poo”. To quote, “Sneaky Pooh makes a lot of trouble for Minky, his favourite hiding places are in Billy’s tummy and best of all.....his pants.” By externalising the problem into a naughty being we could then help children take charge of the problem. If you are still with me, I wonder if when we do not understand God we externalise what we do not understand into a more comprehensible, more tangible image. I wonder if this is true for angels. Alternatively, perhaps we have all encountered angels but don’t know it: or, is there an angel in all of us; we do, after all, say, “You’re an angel” in common parlance. Perhaps I shouldn’t tamper with the angel imagery much more, however we do need our superheroes. Again, in my work we sometimes use superheroes as pocket sized figures to hold when we are anxious about going into class, an external manifestation of an internal fortitude we need to call forth. I myself, before sitting an important exam, visualised a brightly coloured parrot on my shoulder squawking, “She’s brilliant”; a guardian angel. The Wizard of Oz is a wonderful example of this: the scarecrow got a diploma, the Lion a medal of courage and the tin man, a heart; an external manifestation of qualities dormant, waiting to be given expression. As someone who does believe in angels (having studied the book of Revelation recently) it may be important to not be dualistic about this and be open to all number of possibilities, both literal and metaphorical; perhaps an interesting discussion to be had at the Christmas dinner table between turkey and charades.

Back to the story; **“For nothing will be impossible with God”**. What is hidden in plain sight is God permeating the whole scene. We are never truly alone as people of God are we? As it was with Elizabeth, as it was with Mary, **“Let it be with me according to your word”**; as it is with us. When I reflect on this, I do find it difficult to comprehend why more people don’t want what we have as people of God.

At this time of watching and waiting, the anticipated Easter Journey a symbol of hope and renewal, a gift from God, his only son; what of our annunciations, our callings? Here we are, the servants of God, extraordinary in our ordinariness, surrendering joyfully as we enter the holiness of Easter and hope of renewal.

The Annunciation

By Denise Levertov

*We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.*

*Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whome she acknowledges, a guest.*

*But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage*

*The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent. God waited.
She was free*

*to accept or refuse, choice
integral to humanness.*

*Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another in most lives?
Some unwillingly undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.*

*More often those moments
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.*

Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.

*But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.
She had been a child who played, ate, spelt
like any other child – but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed
in joy not triumph.*

*Compassion and intelligence
fused in her, indivisible.*

*Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,
only asked*

*a simple, "How can this be?"
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply,
perceiving instantly*

*the astounding ministry she was offered:
to bear in her womb*

*Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,*

*the sum of power -
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.*

*Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love -
but who was God*

