

Today's gospel reading is one of the most well-known in all scripture: the Annunciation. It has been the subject of art and beloved of painters for millennia, from the Byzantine iconographers to the French Impressionists and the Pre-Raphaelites. It has also been the inspiration for much poetry throughout the centuries. One of the earliest, the 12th century abbess and mystic Hildegard of Bingen, wrote a chant for her nuns to sing in choir:

*Pierced by the light of God
Mary Virgin,
drenched in the speech of God,
your body bloomed,
swelling with the breath of God*

What an extraordinary image! Mary is 'pierced' and 'swells'; many of the earlier paintings of the Annunciation show her conceiving by the Holy Spirit, who enters her ear – and this is because the ear is the part of the body least capable of active wrong-doing. It is an almost entirely passive instrument. A contemporary poet, Kathleen Wakefield, describes the angel not proclaiming the message, but whispering it in Mary's ear:

*When she heard infinity
whispered in her ear, did the flashing
scissors in her fingers fall
to the wooden floor and the spool unravel,*

the spider's sly cradle tremble with love?

This lovely verse can tell us so much about the circumstances of God's speaking to us, both collectively and as individuals. The importance of the ear in both poetry and painting of the Annunciation is obvious: if we are to hear 'what the Lord has to say' (Psalm 85:8), we must be ready to listen. Most of the time we are not – too many demands are made upon our time and attention; a thousand and one noises ruin what silence there may be around us and – more importantly – *within* us; every day passes in a tsunami of busyness and preoccupation. The small, still voice within the silence doesn't stand a chance. There were no trumpets sounding when Gabriel told Mary what God's plan for her was. It was spoken gently and softly in her ear. In other words: she was ready to listen.

Kathleen Wakefield's poem wonders whether Mary dropped her scissors; she was clearly engaged in needlework or spinning – an ordinary, everyday occupation in those days. It is always in the ordinary and the everyday that God speaks to our hearts. Some of the medieval and late medieval artists gave the Annunciation a terribly grand setting. I am thinking, for example, of Jan van Eyck, whose 15th century painting shows Mary in what looks like a great cathedral; she is robed in blue damask and he is dressed in a sumptuously bejewelled cope and has a crown upon his head. This grandiosity is typical of that time, but it has less appeal to

contemporary taste. God always chooses the small, the weak, the vulnerable, the poor and the unconsidered, to serve his work in the world – of this there can be no doubt. It is why Jesus was born in a stable among the animals – and that's the only reason the angels could be there. Animals and angels need each other. This idea is perfectly captured the line:

(Did) the spider's sly cradle tremble with love?

In other words, even the tiny creature on its cobweb in the corner of the room shared in this quiet, humble yet earth-shattering moment. Whenever there are God-centred moments in our lives, they invariably appear in this way – while we are going about our ordinary, everyday chores. Then, suddenly, we might look at the back of our child's head and be pierced (like Mary) with a sweet-sharp pang of love; or notice the spots and veins and wrinkles on the hands of a long-lived person and feel ourselves caught up unexpectedly in compassion; or see a single white cyclamen still blooming in the otherwise dark earth of winter and feel moved to thank God for its beauty. These moments are all around us when we are open to their presence. An angel may well bring us a message from God in a child's head or old hands or a flower. And why not? Because all these things are ordinary, they can be perfect revelations of the extraordinary. We

don't have to struggle for the grandiose – that has its place, of course, but not in the pilgrim heart.

No one was present in the room when the angel came to Mary – just the two of them were there. What became a sign of redeeming grace in human history began with a private whisper. It is always this way: the glorious is made possible by, and comes from, the lowly – never vice-versa. None of us need be afraid of being unremarkable; Mary would have been about fourteen years of age at the time of the Annunciation and quite unremarkable in every way except for the sweetness of her God-directed soul. Perhaps that is exactly why she was chosen. Sometimes we need to keep what goes on between God and ourselves private; some things that take place in prayer or reflection – or even in a grace-filled dream – are meant to be locked away in our heart to be pondered on. In Luke 2:51 we are told that “Mary treasured all these things up in her heart.” We surely all have certain cherished memories that we don't share with anyone because, somehow, we know that to tell others about them would be to tarnish their lustre. Jesus called this ‘casting your pearls before swine.’ From time to time, especially but not only, in our relationship with God. Privacy is often the greatest blessing in the spiritual life.

It is very significant, I think, that Mary was not troubled or disturbed by the *appearance* of the angel, but only by *what he actually said to her*. His first words, in any case, were: “Do not be afraid.” This was the phrase most often on

Jesus' lips. In other words, the sight of the angel was much less a shock than his message. This is because the ancient world was far more open to the presence of the spiritual, the supernatural, than we 'sophisticated' moderns are. From the very earliest civilisations on, human beings have taken for granted the interpenetration of the material and the spiritual dimensions of life, and of the continuation of life beyond death; so much so, the Egyptians – whose understanding of the next life was very concrete – even arranged provisions for the deceased, especially if they were of noble birth. The light of the spirit glittering within the depths of matter was called by the alchemists of old the *Anima Mundi* – the soul of the world. In medieval theology it was simply an assumed metaphysical fact. The Greek philosopher Plato said in his *Timaeus*: “Therefore, we may consequently state that: this world is indeed a living being endowed with a soul and intelligence ... a single visible living entity containing all other living entities, which by their nature are all related.”

In our day the imagination of the heart, which is capable of envisaging such mysteries, has been thrown over for the analytic computations of the head. By and large – but thank God not totally – the mystery and imagination, the *soul*, has vanished from our world; yet without it, we are left with no other perception of existence than birth, death, and some purposeless sojourn in between. However: all art, all music, all poetry, all creativity, all story-telling – ancient, medieval or the most contemporary – has spiritual roots: above all, it is

the art, music and poetry of the gospels that open the eye to the radiance within and beyond mundane daily living. The real consolation is that mundane daily living becomes a *revelation* of that radiance. This brings us back to the extraordinary being found only in the ordinary.

Mary's *fiat* ('Let it be') made the incarnation of God possible – the *humanisation* of the divine – the participation of God's fullness in the human condition. She *embodied* God. Now, it is the task of each one of us is to do exactly the same. The German mystic and poet Angelus Silesius said that we must become 'pregnant' with God, just as Mary did; in one particular poem he said that we must hear Gabriel's annunciation as clearly as Mary – for if it does not live in us, it remains but a pretty story. Silesius writes:

*If by God's Holy Spirit you are beguiled,
There will be born in you the Eternal Child.
If, like Mary, it is virginal and pure,
Then God will impregnant your soul for sure.
God, make me pregnant, and his Spirit shadow me,
That God may rise up in my soul and shatter me.
What good does Gabriel's 'Ave Maria' do,
Unless he give me that same greeting too?*

Our 21st century ears are perhaps not used to such frank imagery: it might be slightly uncomfortable for us to talk about 'getting pregnant' by God; but when the

gynaecological sheen is rubbed away, we are left with a profound spiritual idea: that God must be embodied in us so that Christ may be continually born into this world. It is, of course, the embodiment and birthing of love. This is absolutely crucial for us now, living as we do in a fairly loveless world. The medieval English mystic Julian of Norwich, in her *Revelations of Divine Love* writes:

“From the time that it was shown, I desired often to know what our Lord’s meaning was. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in inward understanding, saying, ‘Would you know what your Lord’s meaning in this? Learn it well. Love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. Why did he show you? For love. Hold fast to this and you shall learn and know more about love, and you will never need to know or understand about anything else forever.’ Thus did I learn that love was our Lord’s meaning.”

And so it is even – especially – now. The Annunciation story in the gospel tells us of the beginning of the birth of love in the human person – into each one of us – for the sake of the world.