

20 December 2020 Advent 4

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16 and Luke 1: 26-38

Annunciation and Advent

Lord, as we wait and watch for you,
please speak Your word to us.

Take my words and speak through them,
take our hearts and kindle in us
a deeper love for you.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

A young man had a dilemma. There were two women in his life, so which one to settle down with? Some time later, he was passing a church and went, almost in desperation, went in to pray.

He knelt, deep in prayer and as he looked up, he saw the answer.

There written clearly above the altar were the words ***Ave Maria!***
, *Ave Maria* says Gabriel, *Hail! Mary*, the famous opening words of this familiar passage, which we will also hear this evening in our carol service. In our translation it's *Greetings*, and in Greek, 'Be glad' or 'Rejoice!' So although Mary is much perplexed at Gabriel's words and wonders 'what sort of greeting' or 'what manner of salutation' this is, she does know it's **good** news.

We might think, given the momentous nature of Gabriel's message, that the opening word would be a special or, majestic one, but in

fact, 'Greetings' is an everyday term- it's as if Gabriel strolls in and says, ' Morning Mary!'

Today we're going to look at three different artistic representations of this story, then place it within the framework which Geoff brought us so powerfully last week, the **already, not yet, but not never** of Advent.

So to the pictures, starting with this, from the Ethiopian Orthodox church **PIC 1**

I love the eyes of Gabriel- giving a very clear message- yes, it's you, and of Mary – really?

But she looks back at him directly, openly. As she accepts the angel's words and later utters the song of praise we now know as the Magnificat, I can imagine her crossed hands being opened out and lifted in praise to God, can't you?

In some paintings Mary is far more cowed than this. But Luke portrays her from the first as a woman of deep faith who, as we will see, is present throughout his gospel and beyond.

Let's look at the next picture **PIC 2**

A 20th century Pre-Raphaelite painting of Mary, interrupted at prayer- we see her prayer desk with the scroll of Hebrew scriptures, or maybe interrupted in her spinning, for the distaff and yarn are dropped by her side as she looks up at the angel. This Mary is a faithful Jew and also the representative of womankind- as Elizabeth

recognises when Mary visits her and she declares, inspired by the Holy Spirit, 'Blessed are you among women'.

I love Mary's very tangible and gold but weightless halo, crowning her as she scratches her head in consternation. Yet she also has a steadiness and calmness. And this Gabriel is both beautiful and ethereal, coming to Mary's stone pavement outside her solid stone house, from the mystical garden.

There's a garden too in our final painting **PIC 3**

This is perhaps a more familiar renaissance version, Gabriel with splendid wings, Mary sitting as though enthroned, but humbly bowing her head to the angel. In the background, to Gabriel's left, we see Adam and Eve fleeing the Garden of Eden, forbidden fruit scattered at their feet and another angel ushering them out. The hand of God, expelling them is the same hand now sending the Holy Spirit upon Mary to make her the bearer of the Saviour. In another treatment of this composition Adam and Eve are not shown, only a high fence around the garden to exclude all humankind. In yet another, an angel casts them out of the gates by night, out of paradise.

So with all these images in our minds, lets consider how the annunciation fits into Advent

Already – not yet, but not never.

Already. Advent connects us to all of the old testament, just as Mary the faithful Jew, is a member of God's people, down through the generations from Abraham and Sarah..

Today's first reading brought us the prophecy of Nathan, that God's purposes for David were far greater than building a temple. God's plan was to establish the House of David through which the Messiah would be born and through whom God's everlasting Kingdom would come.

Gabriel's words to Mary consciously echo the words of this prophecy, and it is through Mary, betrothed to Joseph of the House of David, that the fulfilment will come. Joseph has his part to play too, of course – and almost derails the plan by wanting to divorce her, for the best possible reasons. But he, like Mary, has a firm foundation of the **already** in his faith, and at Gabriel's bidding he steps courageously into all the uncertainties of the **not yet** which Mary agrees to.

Luke calls Mary *Mariam*- or Miriam- which connects her to the famous Miriam we know- big sister of Moses, used by God to rescue him as a baby, the Moses who would lead God's people from slavery to freedom, while Miriam led them in worship. She was part of God's rescue, his salvation plan, like Mary was to be.

As we've seen, Mary's **already** is rich and faith-filled, but here, the **not yet** of which she has always been aware becomes utterly personal. It's probably the most potent **not yet** anyone can

experience, to await the coming of a child and, for Mary, a **not yet** full of mystery and promise.

In one way, Mary's **not yet** will end with Jesus' birth, and all her experiences of conception, pregnancy and birth will become part of the **already** of her relationship with God.

Luke tells us that, as the baby Jesus is visited by shepherds, *Mary pondered these things and treasured them in her heart*. Such reflection on God's dealings will do this for us, too, filling up the treasures chests of our hearts and enriching the **already** in our lives.

But back to Mary, who in other ways continues to hold the **not yet** about her son throughout his childhood and into his adult life.

She'll hold it as she and Joseph flee with him to Egypt and wait until God tells them they can safely return home.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, Mary, in the background, watches the **not yet** of the kingdom become the **now**.

Never forgetting Simeon's words to her when Jesus was just a baby- *a sword will pierce your heart also*, until that prophecy is fulfilled as she watches him die.

Mary lived the **not yet** right through to the awful **now** of his death.

But she also came to prove the glorious truth of **not never**.

For Mary saw Jesus alive again, before released him finally to return to heaven- her earthly son no more, but **now** the King he was born to be. Luke shows us Mary for the last time in Acts Chapter 2, on the

day of Pentecost, once more embracing God's **not yet** as she waits with the others for the promised Holy Spirit to come, and for the everlasting Kingdom of God to come on earth, as in heaven.

Already, not yet, but not never. For, as the angel Gabriel told her 'Nothing will be impossible for God'.

Today, many things seem even less possible than they were just yesterday. But, may we be inspired by Mary's faith, to appreciate the **already**, to embrace the **not yet** and to believe the **not never**, to live by faith in the Son of God who loves us and gave himself for us. So may we be able to say, with Mary,

Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

May it be to me according to your word.

Amen