

## **Annunciation is for life, not just for Christmas**

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Have you ever seen an angel? I don't think I have, and I presume most of you haven't either. But Mary has. At least that is what the last 2000 years of European art tells us. There are literally tens of thousands of paintings of the annunciation in museums and churches all over Europe. These fall into one of three categories, which we can call 'before, during and after'. In some cases, Mary is turning from whatever she has been doing, and would shortly meet the angel's eyes; in other paintings, Mary meets the angel's gaze quite directly; in a third kind of paintings, Mary has already met the angel's gaze, and is now averting her eyes in deference. In all cases, Mary clearly has seen, is seeing, or will soon be seeing the angel. And the King James Bible agrees:

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail ... And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

Now we play spot the difference. Here's the version of our Gospel reading that you heard earlier:

And [the angel] came to her and said, "Greetings ..." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Did you spot the difference? There's no mention of 'seeing' in this modern version, or indeed in any modern version. I have never noticed that until this week. When I did some homework, I found that the most reliable ancient manuscripts of Luke's Gospel indeed do not mention 'seeing'. Modern commentators unanimously agree that these manuscripts represent what Luke intended. Luke did not say that Mary saw Gabriel. We're at liberty to infer that she did; but we are equally at liberty to assume that that she did not.

Interestingly, a minority of annunciation artists have assumed that Mary in fact did *not* see Gabriel. In most of these minority cases, the artist only hints at Mary not seeing Gabriel. However, in one or two cases, the artist wants to be quite unambiguously, and paints a great big pillar to block Mary's view of Gabriel.

Why am I obsessed with whether Mary saw Gabriel or not? Isn't that a rather trivial aside? No, it isn't, because this business of 'seeing' affects how we hear our Gospel reading today. If we think Mary saw Gabriel, then her experience puts her in the category of the spiritual elite, and we likely decide that her experience has little to do with our more mundane existence. On the other hand,

if Mary did not actually *see* anything, then we may be encouraged to ponder her experience and consider whether it is something that we may all share.

So let's do that. Let's proceed from the assumption, allowed by the text, that Mary did not see Gabriel, and see where it leads us. Let's start by asking another question that the passage does not answer directly, but leaves room for us to ponder. How long do you think the annunciation lasted? If you, like me, had assumed that Mary saw Gabriel, then I suspect that you, like me, would have assumed that the whole thing was over quite quickly. Seeing an archangel would probably have been an overwhelming experience, leaving little room for anything but instant obedience: light, camera, action, enter angel, Mary says yes, cut; all over in less than 5 minutes.

But there is nothing overwhelming about the way the story is told. When Mary heard Gabriel's greeting, she was 'perplexed' rather than overwhelmed. There room to 'ponder'. After further revelation from Gabriel, there was room for questioning before Mary gave her consent with those famous words, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord ...' Mary was not overwhelmed into submission by a snappy audio-visual razzmatazz. Instead, our text suggests that the Orcadian poet Edwin Muir has got it right:

The angel and the girl are met  
Earth was the only meeting place.

...

See, they have come together, see,  
While the destroying minutes flow,  
Each reflects the other's face  
Till heaven in hers and earth in his  
Shine steady there.

...

Outside the window footsteps fall  
Into the ordinary day  
And with the sun along the wall  
Pursue their unreturning way  
Sound's perpetual roundabout  
Rolls its numbered octaves out  
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune

But through the endless afternoon  
These neither speak nor movement make.  
But stare into their deepening trance  
As if their grace would never break.

Notice that Muir did not say they stared into each other's eyes. Instead, they stared into a common, 'deepening trance'. In Muir's annunciation, the *dramatis personae* did not even exchange audible words: 'these neither speak nor movement make', in contrast to hubbub outside the window: 'sound's perpetual roundabout'. As the shadow lengthens along the wall outside, there is a strange stillness inside, a 'grace [that] would never break'.

Our pondering has led us to a strange place. Perhaps Mary didn't see any angel. Perhaps there was no speech of the ordinary kind. Perhaps it was a long process rather than a snap action. The text does not say any of this directly, but it permits us to interpret it the way Edwin Muir has done. Indeed it encourages us to do so by saying that Mary *pondered* Gabriel's greeting. The Greek word used, *dialogizomai*, is where we get the English word 'dialogue' from, but in New Testament Greek, it always means an *inner* dialogue - reasoning, reflecting, arguing things out in one's own mind.

Let's ponder some more. What do you think Mary was doing when Gabriel came? Here the text is silent, but the whole European artistic tradition agrees: Mary was reading. Indeed, a *genre* of painting called 'the Virgin of the Annunciation' shows no angel, but only Mary, with a book, which is almost certainly the Bible. Mary was pondering God word when Gabriel visited. I think these artists have got it right in essence - Mary was a habitual ponderer of God's word, but rather than reading it, she more likely heard it read out in the synagogue Sabbath by Sabbath.

For a habitual ponderer of God's word, annunciation was unlikely to be a one off. Edwin Muir suggests that annunciation became a perpetual state for Mary -

But through the endless afternoon  
These neither speak nor movement make.  
But stare into their deepening trance  
As if *their grace would never break*.

For Mary, the annunciation was for life, not just for Christmas. If that is the case, then perhaps the annunciation was not just for Mary either. Perhaps we can all expect annunciations if we learn to ponder God's word. And by 'God's word', I don't just mean the Bible. It certainly includes that - I wonder how much we ponder the readings we hear Sunday by Sunday. But God's word goes beyond the Bible. Genesis and Saint John picture all of creation as coming from God's word. The cosmos is one gigantic letter from the Creator. Pondering any thing, any happenstance, in the creation can lead to annunciations. That is the implication of saying that creation came into being by the word of God.

So, I for one have no doubt that as scientists ponder the creation, they are visited by angels with annunciations. Why else would it be that scientists habitually

report their discovery with the words, 'It occurred to me that ...' Why else would Einstein say, 'The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.' I think these scientists, Einstein, James Clerk Maxwell, the lot, even me, have been habitually visited by angels without knowing it. But we heard the angels all right. That, of course, is the way God's messengers work - delivering the message, without drawing attention to the messenger. That is why Saint Paul can say, 'Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.' (Romans 1:20)

Have you, have I, been visited by angels? If we have pondered deeply about anything, the chances are that we have. Mary's story encourages us to be on the look out. For us, and not just for Mary, annunciation can be not just for Christmas, but for life!