

Sermon 24<sup>th</sup> December 2023

Christmas Eve / 4th Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Romans 16:25- 27

Luke 1: 26 – 38

In our Gospel reading this morning we come to one of the most well-known and loved Christian stories, one that we were probably told in childhood, the opening scene of Luke's account of the nativity of Jesus. This afternoon lots of children will gather once more for the retelling of the whole story, this year aided by our new crib figures.

Stories and myths are important for people of all ages, and through them we explore our emotions and ethics, constructing our understanding of existence, and mystery, in community with others. There have been studies by psychotherapists on the centrality of myths for our mental health, and they suggest a correlation between the rise in depression and suicide with the loss of our common myths.<sup>i</sup> Labelling myths as falsehoods is a dangerous over-rationalisation. We need metaphor, poetry, art, song, fiction and all sorts of imagery, what is called 'right brain activity' to nurture our inner life, our psycho-spiritual wholeness, and our connection to our heavenly Father.

In his commentary on St Luke, the theologian GB Caird says:

' Myth is a pictorial way of expressing truths which cannot be expressed so readily or so forcefully in any other way'<sup>ii</sup>

The appearance of the angelic hosts in Biblical literature talks to us of 'heavens too big to see'<sup>iii</sup>. They express a confidence in spiritual realms of love, truth and beauty beyond our comprehension. There are also biblical passages, where there is mythic exploration of evil with the 'fallen angels', which addresses the ever-present problem of suffering.

In our story today, we have quite a restrained account of the visit of an angel to Mary in the role of messenger from God. 'Messenger' is, in fact, the root meaning of the word 'angel'.

So is our account also history? The history we can be certain of is that Luke felt compelled to write about Jesus' birth in this mythological way. The important point for Caird is that Luke paints the word picture of the overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit, which echoes the hovering of God's Spirit over the waters in the Creation poem of Genesis chapter 1. In this way, Luke is expressing his belief that in Jesus' ministry 'God's great act of deliverance [was] accomplished in accordance with his ancient promises'<sup>iv</sup> Whether or not the conception was achieved without a human father is a much less important question in the face of what Luke is attesting to that the man to be born of Mary will be known as Son of the Most High, he will have the throne of his ancestor David, he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, he will be holy, and called 'Son of God'.

At what point did Luke join the church and start thinking about Jesus in these terms? Luke probably wasn't an eyewitness of Jesus's life, but we are told in the opening verses of his gospel that he has studied the eyewitness accounts of others, carefully, in order to write an orderly account. What Luke learnt about Jesus from these accounts will have been in the light of post-resurrection reflection, leading to the titles he places in the mouth of Gabriel. The titles he gives to Jesus are rooted in Jewish tradition, which is a surprise coming from Luke, who seems particularly interested in presenting the Gospel to the Gentiles.

The culmination of our Old Testament reading this morning is the announcement through Nathan to King David, (who had united the tribes of Israel), that his family would be established, his kingdom would stand for all time, and his throne established for ever. This prophetic message became the basis for the hopes of a Messiah in later Judaism. The titles that come from Gabriel to Mary, in Luke's account, place Jesus firmly in the Jewish tradition of the line of David and, that he is the fulfilment of their Messianic hopes.

So our gospel reading this morning, often called 'The Annunciation' gives us a mythic expression of the developing creed of the early church. It is a story that

has captured our imaginations and inspired art and music for centuries, with the earliest known depiction being found in a fourth century Roman catacomb.<sup>v</sup>

Many of the portrayals of Mary are as obedient and submissive, as we see in our Lady Chapel annunciation window, which is about 100 years old:



Mary is seated, head bowed, hands folded on her heart. The male Gabriel stands tall as he blesses her.

Our own Nicola Slee in her *'The Book of Mary'* describes this sort of portrayal as 'monstrously oppressive'. Mary is shown as 'passive, meek, unthinking'.<sup>vi</sup> The portrayal is not actually true to Luke's account, where Mary is described as perplexed, thoughtful and questioning, and her final agreement has an assertive feel about it. Nicola asks how we might move away from this centuries' old way of picturing the scene, and instead to depict it in a way that gives a

'robust and liberating model to contemporary women and men, that would not reinforce passivity and unreflective obedience in believers but would acknowledge and applaud the costly self-offering of our foremother in faith?'

Nicola offers us some poems that explore 'a variety of vantage points', as she seeks to rise to her own challenge. Here is one of them, where Nicola is more faithful to Luke's account than our window is. It's called '*Fiat*'

I uttered myself  
I claimed my voice  
I was not afraid to question

I held my ground  
I made my yes  
Looking straight into the angel's eyes  
(any slave girl could have been beaten or raped for less)

There was no mastery here  
Nothing was taken from me  
Everything was given

Here I am:  
See me

Listen

In another poem, called *Annunciation*, Nicola plays around with the idea that Mary (known by the Hebrew 'Miriam' in the poem) would have lived a daily life of noise and toil and Gabriel might have found her in a quite different setting than a quiet garden. Here is the last verse of this poem:

I was never alone, anyway.  
There was always somebody wanting something:  
'Miriam, help me make the bread.'  
'Miriam, clear that trestle'.  
'Miriam, fetch more water.'  
No angel wafted in on golden wings.  
Gabriel barged in, banging his bag down on the table.  
It was the only way he could get my attention above the din.  
At least a dozen pairs of eyes turned to look where he stood,  
Dishevelled and dusty, shouting  
'Miriam, there's another job for you to do'

I really warm to that picture. Mary could have been kneading dough in a busy kitchen when Gabriel came to talk to her, and he might have just walked in, 'dishevelled and dusty'. Nothing is said about wings in Luke's verses.

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I wonder how many women will give birth in Gaza today? Will more bombs fall as their contractions begin? Are their homes already destroyed, their friends or family blown to pieces, or buried alive? Are they hungry and desperate for water? Very probably. Traumatized in this way, they are likely to give birth prematurely. Will they find a safe place, or will they end up bringing their babies to birth in the dust and the rubble? How can they care for their precious new sons and daughters? How can they feed them if they can't produce any milk? How get them incubated? How can they keep them safe, when they are so weakened themselves?

In an Amos Trust online meeting on Tuesday, we were told about a woman recently being given an emergency caesarean on the floor of the Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza, without anaesthetic. The Al Ahli Hospital<sup>vii</sup> is managed by our sister episcopal church in Jerusalem. It is one of the oldest hospitals in Gaza City and the only cancer hospital in Gaza. On Wednesday the news came through that the hospital had been bombed and every employee arrested. Despite the huge difficulties in getting any news out of Gaza, the hospital director, Suhaila Tarazi was able to send a message to Amos Trust:

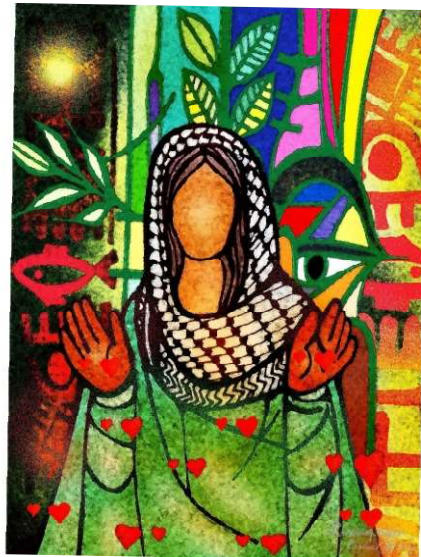
*Right now, my top priority is to free my detained staff. They did not do anything wrong to be arrested. Ahli, as you know is always a place of peace, love and reconciliation. It should be respected and protected as a humanitarian institution for all.<sup>viii</sup>*



Suhaila Tarazi director of Al Ahli Hospital

Most of the people of Gaza are refugees already, brutally evicted from their homes in 1948, a result of the Zionist ideology, which many Jews oppose, dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They live under the special UN body that works with all Palestinian refugees. Now the UN is reporting that they are powerless to help, with humanitarian aid much reduced, and that half the population is starving. The Gazans are also trapped by a huge security fence, with all crossings closed. They have been suffering bombing raids by the Israelis for decades, but the current genocidal rampage is far worse than anything that has gone before. The people have nowhere safe to hide, or to escape to as the bombs fall.

With all this going on in the land of her birth, here is an image of Mary for our day:



*Palestinian Mary 1* by Yousef Katalo<sup>ix</sup>

Yousef Katalo, is a Palestinian artist. Here he is portraying Mary in a keffiyeh, the square scarf, commonly worn by Palestinians.

Mary was born and brought up as a Palestinian Jew, a daughter of the house of Israel and of the soil of Palestine. Later in life, as a disciple of Jesus, she will have remained a Jew as well as becoming one of the first Palestinian Christians, foremother of the whole Church, but of Palestinian Christians, including the Al Ahli Hospital, in particular.

Bethlehem is less than 100 miles from Gaza, it too is surrounded by a wall with very restricted freedom of movement for its Palestinian population who have to wait in long queues at checkpoints to get to their farmland. This year Christmas in Bethlehem is very quiet, with no Christmas decorations or festivities. This decision was taken by the Church leaders and city council to be in solidarity with the Gazans.

Tonight, Midnight Mass will be marked very quietly in Bethlehem, and instead of the songs of the heavenly hosts, if we listen carefully we will hear Mary and all the angels weeping with their people.

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<sup>i</sup> May, Rollo *The Cry for Myth*, Souvenir Press 1991

<sup>ii</sup> Caird, G.B. *Saint Luke* Penguin, 1963. p.79

<sup>iii</sup> A quotation from a poem by C.S. Lewis entitled *On being human*

<sup>iv</sup> Caird, G.B. *Saint Luke* Penguin, 1963 p.30

<sup>v</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation\\_in\\_Christian\\_art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation_in_Christian_art) [accessed 15.12.23]

<sup>vi</sup> Slee, Nicola *The Book of Mary*, SPCK, 2007, p14

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.amostrust.org/palestine-justice/partners/al-ahli-hospital/> [accessed 20.12.23]

<sup>viii</sup> <https://mailchi.mp/amostrust/al-ahli-update-december-2023?e=13e1d93089> [accessed 20.12.23]

<sup>ix</sup> <https://iriwaq.com/paintings/483-palestinian-mary-i.html> [accessed 20.12.23]