



2^{1st} December 2020
4th Sunday of Advent
2 Samuel 7.1-11,16
Luke 1.26-38
'All I saw was burnt toast.'
St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr Ivan Khovacs

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I had a very happy Catholic upbringing, rich in faith, rich in imagination, rich in love of learning, and rich in love of neighbour. All things which have stayed with me for life.

I was a very sceptical child. I still am. I was the kind of kid that, if someone saw the virgin Mary on a piece of toast, all I saw was burnt toast.

And so, today, I feel that you have gifted me by asking me to preach, on this 4th Sunday of Advent, this passage on the Annunciation. I feel I am beginning to see Mary as I have never seen her before. I hope this sermon isn't simply an inner monologue with myself. It is, I hope, a kind of dialogue with you, and so, can I invited you to come along?

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I'd like to think I'm grown-up-enough that I don't come to the story of the Annunciation to super-impose a version of Mary who isn't there in the Scripture. I can imagine Mary as the Victim of God's supervening will. That's something I can imagine but isn't there in the Scripture. I can imagine Mary the posterchild of servile womanhood; I can imagine Mary saying Yes, and becoming complicit in her own oppression. That too is something I can imagine but isn't there in the Scripture.

In fact, you have challenged me, in inviting me to read this passage along with you, to go beyond my pre-conceived ideas and to go behind the slogans, and to ask, Who is Mary

who is actually there in the Scripture? As soon as I do that, I begin to see a Mary I never knew.

All my life, all I've see is burnt toast. But here, I see a Mary who is in possession of herself, in possession of her body—which is to say of Christ's body being born in her. In Luke 1.35 we find this word *gennomenon* (rhymes with *phenomenon*),¹ it comes from the word we have in English for genesis or the story of beginnings. In our English Bibles, it tells us that a child *will be born*, speaking into the future. But in the Greek, *gennomenon* goes beyond the simple chronology of past, present, and future. Here, it is written in the form of an all-encompassing continuous present: it tells us that *Christ is already being born*.

Christ is being born in the very act of Mary saying "let it be with me according to God's word."

Mary both invites and makes possible the very reality she names, Christ who is already "*being being*"² born.

I hope this is the Mary we see when we sing our offertory hymn ... *The angel Gabriel from heaven came*; keep in mind the verse that goes

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head
"To me be as it pleaseth God,"—she said
My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name.
Most highly favoured lady. Glo—ria!

I hope we can see the Mary who invites into herself an unknown future; and Mary who, in bringing Christ into the world, bodies forth—if we could possibly imagine this—bodies forth God's future; and ours.

This is the Mary I am beginning to see for the first time. And I would like to think I'm not above learning from Mary, who by the lights of this Gospel, is both the first disciple of our faith, and the first person to go out and tell the Good News of Jesus.

¹ γεννώμενον

² This is the best English, I think, to capture the form of the continuous present in the original Greek.

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You remember that amazing story in John's Gospel, at the wedding feast in Cana: Mary watches Jesus growing up and growing into his calling, and when they are invited to this wedding and the wine runs out, Mary unceremoniously outs Jesus saying: Is it wine you need? Speak to him?

Mary knows to turn to Jesus. And she knows to point others to Jesus. That's Mary the disciple.

But, in a sense, that should be no surprise, if we've read today's Gospel carefully, which I know I haven't done. I've read this passage my entire life and I've never noticed how Mary becomes the first evangelist: she goes out and tells Elizabeth this Good News!

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As we make our way through our Christmas readings, we are going to hear these sentences that follow immediately from today's Gospel:

Mary set out at that time and went in haste to a town in the Judean hill country, where she entered the house of Zachariah, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting ... the baby leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she gave a loud cry..! (Luke 1.39-42)

(If we were going to put this on as a drama, I think we would find a member of the congregation could do that amazing *ululation*, that amazing cry of exultation women know in Arab countries and in other parts of the Near East. That's how this news reaches Elizabeth.)

Mary's Gospel reaches Elizabeth. And John the Baptist still growing in his mother's womb, in a sense becomes, along with his mother, the first to hear Mary's Gospel news.

Our Goddaughter is not quite twenty weeks into her first pregnancy. We were looking at

baby scans last night; the "gender reveal" party they were supposed to have was cancelled because of a stricter lockdown where she lives in Ohio. It's amazing how sharp and realistic an image you can have nowadays of the developing life. That's the kind of amazement and joy Mary carries with her as she goes out to spread her Gospel news.

This is what advent four is about. It's certainly what I'm learning from the Mary I never knew.

Let me be more specific. Because this Gospel of the Mary I never knew, is going to help us to read the Christmas story in the present moment; and it is going to show us *how to* read the present moment.

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We are heading into Tier 4 lockdown. Once again, we are into the unknown. And as we pray for this time of darkness, we ask God to fill it richly. In Genesis, God said "Let there be light." And there *is* light. Here, in the Annunciation, the light of Christ is being wombed in a waiting darkness. And I'm beginning to hear in Mary's waiting something I somehow have missed before:

But how?
Here am I.
Let it be.

I find in this a three-part prayer, an openness to the waiting, and a Mary who doesn't try to control the narrative. In prayer, I find it very tempting fall into a pattern of telling God what to do, who to do it for, when and how. Mary throws off any docile passivity. But she also resists the impulse to control the narrative: Mary trusts herself. Mary's BUT HOW? / HERE AM I. / LET IT BE is a genuine seeking. And what does Mary find? Here am I.

Here you and I are. In Genesis God speaks the world into creation, God sings into being the

music of the spheres. HERE AM I is a recapitulation of God's act of creation. You and I are eternally being spoken into being.

Christ becomes the word within the words. Christ the Logos, Christ, God's Word made flesh—foetal tissue wombed in darkness. *Christ already being born into the unknown* is the answer to Mary's

But how?
Here am I.
Let it be.

* * *

I would like us to take with us this three-part prayer into the days ahead. We cannot control the lockdown narrative. But we have been here before: we can trust ourselves, and we can let this be a time for God to gestate in us something new, we can let the God of beauty and order and light and music, in these weeks ahead, create in us something beautiful. Each one of us is an unfinished song, each of us a not-yet-fulfilled promise, each of us a hope yet in the making.

And as Christ is wombed in darkness.
Let our hope be wombed in this waiting darkness:

Let it be.
Let it be with me.
Let it be with us, according to that Word.

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THE TRUTH IS we are heading back into an unknow future, but not only because of a lockdown in the throes of a global pandemic. But because this Christmas Christ is being born among us, here, in this community of St Jame's Piccadilly: Christ is being born to us, for us, with us, in us.

We don't know how that's going to turn out!

Will we even recognise ourselves in 2021? What that will do to us, as people who believed in God, and who believed in ourselves, because we believed in God.

But how?
Here am I.
Let it be.

We've been with each other through everything 2020 could throw at us. *And we know that someone was really there.* How much more in 2021? We just don't know.

But now I'm beginning to understand, why our Gospel today, Mary's Gospel, ends with these words:

'And the angel departed from her.'

The angel departed from her...

That means that the angel was really there!