

On the Feast of the Annunciation

Dear Friends:

Because there is still some unclarity as to some of the ways in which it is permissible for the bishops and priests of the Church to minister at present, to support the faith of the Church and the public at large, I have decided simply to offer you a homily for your prayers today, a contemplation on the Gospel for the feast of the Annunciation. Naturally I celebrate the Mass each day at home, giving thanks for the clergy and parishes of the Ebbsfleet family especially, and joining you and the whole Church in prayer to God for the needs of so many across the world in the present pandemic.

+Jonathan

Gospel: Luke 1.26—38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Homily:

This morning, at around six, my usual time, I woke ... singing! In my head you understand; but still, strong enough that for a good couple of hours now I have kept on wanting to burst out:

"Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle!
Sing the ending of the fray ...
Tell how Christ, the world's Redeemer,
As a Victim won the day."

It is one of the great hymns of Passiontide. (My mind is obviously revving up to sing and to celebrate Holy Week.) It was written by the sixth-century French bishop and poet Venantius Fortunatus. He could probably still hear the echo of the Roman imperial army's proud, retreating thud thud thud as they finally left France to protect Italy. He certainly knew what the Roman legionaries' songs sounded like: they were marching songs. And like his other great Passiontide hymn, 'The royal banners forward go', 'Sing my tongue' strides out like the heavy dogged metre

of soldiers' marching songs. It's very clear in the Latin original; but we can still hear it in our familiar English translation if you forget (only for a moment, don't worry!) the plaintive and instinctive plainsong tune. "Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle! / Sing the ending of the fray." This is the hymn the Church in the West has for centuries sung as, with uplifted hearts, we venerate the cross that stands at the very core of the Good Friday Liturgy.

Inevitably I asked myself, why? Not why was I singing that hymn, but why *on the Annunciation* of all feasts? Even allowing for Gabriel being urgent and warrior-like, as you can see in the icon that accompanies this homily, the Annunciation hasn't much to do with the heat of battle. Why, in this time of 'stupendous struggle' (to quote another seasonal hymn), struggle for the health and future of humanity through which we are all passing, was my memory connecting the witness of the Virgin Mary, chosen of God to bear his Son, and the glorious battle, 'mighty and terrible' waged on the cross? And as I contemplated a phrase came to me from the Magnificat which Mary sang when she went to tell her cousin Elizabeth about Gabriel's message: "He has shown strength with his arm – scatted the proud in the imagination of their hearts."

In her contemplation on Gabriel's message Mary expresses—in the past tense—the certainty she has about God's wonders: his mighty acts to create and sustain a universe, and to form and nurture a people as a witness of his great power and glory. He has routed the arrogant, she says; overthrown rulers, filled the hungry, dismissed the rich, rescued Israel, remembered his ancient mercy. All because he *promised* that he would to Abraham and his descendants. And it is in God's nature to be faithful to his promises. In her characteristic way, Mary, woman of great faith (Mt 15.28), pondered the mighty acts of God (Lk 2.51). She remembered the Lord's actions and promises of the past in order to open herself to the future: the future in which, through Jesus, God wrought his mightiest acts of power and opened a new age of the Spirit for humanity.

Mary remembered the past in order to open herself to the future.

That is at the heart of living the Christian tradition for all of us. The icon of the feast is labelled 'the bringing of good news' – *evangelismos* – a message which Mary was able to embrace because she knew *God could be relied upon*. The memory of the mighty acts of God were, in her, the source of hope and prophecy for the future.

This spiritual attitude of faith and hope is the good news that the Church must bring to our present moment, which is, yes, a moment of battle: a battle to preserve one another's health and lives, a battle for one another's well-being, and a battle for the future. It is also a battle for our humanity, for what humanity looks like in the light of God. Trusting in God's mighty acts in the past, trusting him for the human and spiritual resources we need to meet the present darkness, each member of the Church has a responsibility to nurture this hope in them and bring hope in whatever way we can, to whomever we can (safely) reach – confident of his promise for the future.

This is no evasion of the real and sudden seriousness of our situation. The acceptance of Gabriel's message, the letting-go, and the receiving of new resources of grace that it involved, prepared in Mary the route Calvary. The new levels of obedience she learned took her into the heart of the pain and suffering that would be brought into focus in the death of her Son. In a compline hymn for Good Friday sung by Eastern Christians, the Virgin laments, "Where, O my Son, are the good

tidings that Gabriel brought me? He called thee, King, God, Son of the Most High; and now, O my sweet Light, I behold thee naked, wounded and lifeless.”

But even in that moment – a moment of shock and bereavement as sharp and deep as any that we may suffer in the coming weeks as we celebrate Holy Week at what may turn out to be the height of coronavirus in this country – memory of God’s mighty acts of God were for Mary the source of hope for the future. All that God had done through the birth of her eternal Son, he will do likewise to bring Jesus to his brothers and sisters: for their rebirth from death, and the shadow of death, to the life and freedom on which the sun does not set.

Prayer:

Pour forth, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy grace into our hearts: that, as we have known the incarnation of thy Son, Jesus Christ, by the message of an angel, so by his cross and passion we may be brought to the glory of his resurrection; through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.