

20 December 2020, Advent 4: Luke 1 26-38

Look at Mary's encounter with the angel from a different angle: this story is not just about God's humility in becoming human, not just about Mary's obedient lowliness. God's encounter with Mary through the angel reveals God's "economy," to use the old word; that is, how God works in the world, not just 2000 years ago, but for all time.

Gabriel greets Mary by saying, literally, *Greetings, O **highly** favored one! The Lord is with you.* We might assume Mary is *highly favored* because of her spiritual and moral exceptionalism, her virtue and piety. If that were so Luke would have told us what those exceptional qualities were. He does not because it is not relevant. God chooses whom God chooses. Mary is highly favored because she is chosen, not because she "qualified".

Mary's first response is pragmatic: "I am a virgin." God's reply is thoroughly, well to contemporary ears, weird: She will conceive and birth a child without human effort. Of course, our contemporary sensibilities are scandalized by the angel's response: whatever happens next is God's work, not Mary's, and certainly not Joseph's; the only thing needed is desire to be part of God's work in the world. At the first creation God spoke, creating all things out of nothing with no human effort; now at the second, new creation God speaks through the angel and the first-born of the new heavens and new earth spring from a yet more glorious primordial womb. Mary fulfills her devotion to God; she is as mysterious and compelling as the earliest universe; we have no more than a glimpse of her in the Bible. She remains a small, simple figure, who through small, simple obedience, brings forth the Word Incarnate who saves the world.

In this story there is theology, and our mission is given us. I can only illustrate by way of example: In the late 1980's I was at the lowest point in my life: newly divorced, working a secular job. The one bright spot was the beginning of a relationship with Geri. We wanted, needed to be part of a Church. We had visited several and then walked into St. Wilfred's in Sarasota. It is an unexceptional place in almost every way: nothing wrong, but nothing remarkable. We were invited to coffee hour, Geri's two sons in tow (8 and 10 years old). Again, a nondescript little gathering. Several people came up, modestly introducing themselves. Then, an older gentleman, perhaps in his mid-70's approached us. He said, "Good morning, my name is Courtland Richards and if it is all right, I would like to give your boys something." He held out his hand in which there were two little, cheap metal crosses. Of course, we agreed. He sat down and spoke to the boys directly: "Boys, I am Mr. Richards and I am happy you are here. I am giving you each a little cross. I want you to put these crosses in your pockets or backpacks every day, and when you feel the cross in your pocket or see it when getting something out of your backpack, remember that Jesus loves you. Next Sunday I want you to tell me how your week went with carrying your cross, okay?" Of course, we were back next Sunday and became part of our new parish family for the rest of our time in Florida.

St. Francis reportedly said: *(Our) primary apostolate...is simply to live the Gospel life in simplicity and joy.* In our culture of overachievement and egomania we can bring the same mentality to spirituality, to the common life of the Church and especially to what can only be called a recruitment mentality—which is not the same as evangelism. Recruitment is about promotion, luring people in with hype about what we will supposedly do for them to make their lives momentarily complete. Evangelism is about attraction: living the grace and redemption of Jesus Christ with authenticity, stability, and joy, with simple generosity in our relationships with others—even strangers, even children.

If you do not believe you are called to such a way of living you are wrong. Live the truth that, as Mary, you are **highly** favored in God's sight. Today, you—yes, you—are most highly favored, the Lord is with you. Now, will you be with Him? Will you intently live the Gospel life in simplicity and joy? Will you invite God to overshadow you in all your relationships and environments? Will you be fearless in doing something small for God, so that God through you accomplishes great things? Will you carry the cross and joyously give it away? *Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your Word.*

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.