

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, December 24, 2023

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

on

Luke 1:26-38

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A God Able to Care

Aside from the crucifixion, few other Christian subjects have enjoyed greater popularity with painters than the scene described in today's Gospel, the so-called 'Annunciation'. Virtually all the great masters of the Middle-ages and the Renaissance painted it. There is a fascination with the idea of Mary's disquiet, surprise, and eventual acquiescence to the angel's message: we are told that she "was much perplexed by the angel's words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be", the angel's reply implies that she was afraid: "Do not be afraid, Mary", he says, and Mary struggles to make sense of the event announced to her: "How can this be?"

Most of the content of this page of the Gospel leaves us too "much perplexed": starting with the image of an angel casually barging into Mary's kitchen, then the idea of giving birth to a child without sexual intercourse, or of a barren woman conceiving in her old age.

The angel's explanations are not much help: how is Mary supposed to be reassured by the idea of a "spirit" coming over her and of a "power" overshadowing her? And finally we have the hyperbolic characterisation of the child about to be born: Son of the Most High, heir to the throne of David, holy, Son of God.

We should not be afraid of finding this page so difficult to interpret. Over the years I have come to the conclusion that the intention of Luke in this page is precisely this: that we too should be perplexed, that we too should be exposed to something we cannot make sense of. The purpose of this page of the Gospel is not to explain how Jesus is the Son of God but rather to teach us how to deal with everything we cannot make sense of in our faith, in our relation with God, in the way God acts in our lives. So often we too with regards to God, like Mary, struggle, are afraid, perplexed, cannot avoid asking *why*.

Whenever everything goes according to plan in our lives, we think little or never about God. Curiously though, we always think of God or divinity or some higher power when misfortune, setback, illness, grief strike us. I have heard this poignant question many times – especially over the past couple of weeks: "Why is this happening?", "Why me?", "Am I being punished of something?". Even people who do not see themselves as religious, when confronted with the absurdity of life, cannot avoid wondering, being perplexed, being afraid. Something in us resists the idea that things can happen by accident, without a reason.

We prefer the thought of being punished for something by the universe, by life, by a higher power rather than believing that awful things can happen to us simply at random.

It is at this junction, as I meditate anew on this page of the Gospel this year, that I find it comforting. It is right to be perplexed, afraid, and unable to make sense of what happens to us. What we should never do however is think that we are punished for something, that the higher power out there might be intent on retribution, on teaching us a lesson.

On the contrary, if there is one emphasis in this page of the Gospel, it is on how much the Lord wants us to know that he has our back, he is there for us, he cares about us.

It is not just to Mary, but to each one of us that the angel says: “**Do not be afraid for you have found favour with God**”. The message here is that God will never see us other than with benevolence, caringly, anxious to come to our rescue, to be there for us. Almost everything else in this passage is enigmatic, but not this sentence: the thing we can be certain of is that we have *value* in God’s eyes.

Whatever we might have done wrong, whatever punishment we might think we deserve, this is the way *we* look at ourselves, and at each other. God looks at us in another way. He enters in our lives encouraging us not to be afraid. He persuades us that all he wants is to take care of us.

This is confirmed by another sentence of the angel to Mary: “**For nothing will be impossible with God**”. Does this mean that God has the power to do everything, in creation, in the history of the world, in the triumph of good over evil and the like? It might be, but I do not think that this is the meaning of this sentence in this context.

Indeed, when the angel says that “Nothing will be impossible to God” he is talking about Mary’s cousin Elizabeth: an old woman taunted and humiliated by her barrenness during the whole of her life and who is finally becoming a mother and conceiving a son.

If I were God, I would choose something a bit more impactful and sensational to give a proof of my power. Indeed, in the Old Testament God divides the waters of the Red Sea, makes food rain from heaven, and even stops the sun in midcourse.

Here however God is not intent on giving a demonstration of power. He wants to reassure Mary and each one of us not that he has the power to do whatever he wants but that he has the *ability* and the *desire* to care for each one of us personally, individually.

Here we perceive the reason of the enduring fascination of this scene of the Gospel not only among artists but in Christian piety, namely that it is personal, intimate, domestic.

God *does* come in Mary’s kitchen, catches her in the midst of her daily chores.

There is an announcement, but much more deeply there is exchange, a conversation.

Mary is not a pawn in a story much bigger than her. She is greeted, listened to, praised, comforted, encouraged.

Thus the pregnancy of her cousin Elisabeth is not a proof of the power of God – because it is not a demonstration of power that can win over Mary.

The whole thrust of this scene is not on *power* but on *care*. Nobody cares for an old woman’s sadness at not having had any child, nobody cares about how she must have felt: in a society that valued women only for their ability to bear children she must have been tortured by a sense of failure, worthlessness, and shame.

God though cares. This is what is possible to him in a unique way: not the power to do anything he wants but the ability to know what burden, guilt, shame, pain each one of us carries within herself or himself, and bring us comfort.

Even the most compassionate among us will always have limited time and energy for the individual inner burden of the people we meet in our lives. Even the most benevolent among the powerful of the world might help people but cannot care for each person, individually, personally – cannot listen to everyone, comfort everyone.

This is the sense in which we have found favour in God's eyes: each one of us is visited. Just like Mary is. It is with regards to my personal fears that God invites me not to be afraid.

It is my perplexity and my inability to make sense of things that he understands.

I am assured that he knows what pains or shames *me* most *now*, and that he cares.

I like to think that this is what Mary understood.

Everything else was just too much: virgin birth, divine insemination, royal offspring. She knew *less* after the angel's explanation than before.

What eventually persuades her is the assurance that “nothing will be impossible to God” in the sense that this is a God who has the unique ability to know, stay close to us, be with us always.

This she trusts. On the basis of this assurance she can say “Here I am” because she realizes that this is what God is telling her in the first place, as he did to Moses, and to Abraham, and as he does to everyone of us. This is what God wants to say to us this Christmas:

“Here I am”.

“I might not always give you answers you can understand, but I want to give you the meaning you need, a care you can trust, a love you can rely on”.