

SERMON, 19 DECEMBER 2021 – MICAH 5, LUKE 1



The Sunday before Christmas, and we focus on Mary. I've shared this Annunciation painting with you before, but it's worth looking at again. It's probably by the Netherland artist Robert Campin, painting about 1425, later made into a triptych, a three part painting, by an assistant. We have Mary sitting and reading – a wise young lady, taking in wisdom. She hasn't yet noticed Gabriel is present, or that her candle has just blown out. Coming in through the left hand window is the light of the Spirit, a flying Jesus, holding his cross. That's replaced the light of the candle, and is heading straight for Mary's womb.

On the right we have Joseph – the carpenter at work – and on the left we have the people who had purchased the image. We don't have definite names for them, one source suggests they might be Peter Engelbrecht and his wife Margarete – he was a merchant from Cologne. They have come into the Virgin's garden, the door is open and they are kneeling, watching this scene unfold before them.



This painting reminds us why. It also has Mary and Gabriel in the centre – I love the sense of perspective and the way the angel is entering the room. God is in the top left hand corner of the painting, and he is looking directly at Mary. Joseph is on the right – apparently he is huddled by the fire to remind us that Jesus will be born in winter. Over on the left we don't have the donors, we have the scene of Adam and Eve being expelled from Paradise – we listened to “Adam lay ybounden” last week – the Annunciation is the start of the healing of the sin of Adam and Eve. Even the garden, which became a wilderness, is

becoming a garden again – you can probably guess the symbolism of the rabbits, fertility at its best. The artist is *Giovanni di Paolo*, an Italian painter working in Sienna. Born 1403, died 1482 – and this is part of a larger altarpiece.

We could happily spend the next few hours looking at lovely Annunciation paintings, and feel warm and snug and uplifted. But art also has the power to challenge us.



I did an art course earlier this year, and we discussed this Annunciation painted in 2000 by John Collier, an American artist. We have the lily, the symbol of Mary’s purity, and she is reading a book. Collier wrote about how he had portrayed Mary as a school girl to remind us she was normal, and when we looked at this on our course everyone else was saying how much they liked it, how the incarnation is so human. I kept quiet, because I don’t like it. For me, this Mary is too young – and I find it very unsettling. The warning bells of “safeguarding” are ringing, and that’s never a comfortable place to be. I don’t want to start a discussion on “consent” but there is something unsettling about the power dynamics in the Christmas story.



Like many a young lady who finds herself in a position she didn’t expect to be, Mary has to go and find help. Not something she can talk to mum about, so she goes and sees her cousin – a cousin, probably quite a bit older than her, more an auntie. Elizabeth too has found herself in a position she didn’t expect to be, and I always think that God silencing her husband Zechariah was a bit unfair – unfair on both Zechariah and on Elizabeth, unable to talk together through the implications of all that had happened. This painting is the “Visitation of the

Virgin to St Elizabeth,” from the workshop of Goossen van der Weyden – National Gallery, part of an altar piece, painted round about 1500.

There is the symbolism in the bible reading of Elizabeth’s baby leaping the womb as Mary arrives – John the Baptist recognising Jesus the Messiah even before they’ve been born – the symbolism of old and young women, both bearing children who will be incredible messengers of God, indeed one is God himself. It is mind-boggling – just as it is that first time when as a dad you put your hand on your partner’s tum and feel a child move underneath. It may be perfectly natural, but it is still mind-blowing.

**At the heart
of Christmas**



Mary’s response is the Magnificat – a song of praise. A song of praise because God is at work, humanity is being restored, the Kingdom of God is coming, Emmanuel, God with us. “At the heart of Christmas” is the Church of England’s slogan this Christmas – and at the moment that feels hard to live up to. I want church to be at heart of people’s Christmases this year, I want to get them in, help them remember how important we are, be successful – but I’m worried about covid, and big numbers, and a large part of me doesn’t want to see anyone else this week, I just want to remind healthy and virus-free so I can see my kids next weekend. Ugghh.

But I need to remember that it is not “church” that should be at heart of people’s Christmases this year, it is Christ. We will proclaim his love in and through our church buildings, We will proclaim his love in and through church (which is not the same as “church buildings”) – we will bring people together, and we will support them when we are separate. This afternoon I hope we will christian Zachary at St Edmund’s. We married mum and dad Lee and Emma a couple of years ago, we’ve baptised Vienna, child number 1, as well. Lee is a paramedic, he’s served in the army, and he’s currently working with the UN in Ukraine. He says it’s boring, because when the peace is being kept there isn’t a lot for a paramedic to do – if the peace stops being kept, that’s when he’ll really be needed. If I was a young married couple with two young children, I wouldn’t want my other half serving in what might well be a war zone, although lovely they are together at Christmas. If they ask the church to be part of their Christmas celebrations, if they want to bring their child to be baptised, what a privilege. I want them to find a deeper faith, I’d love them to be here on a Sunday and not just on a Thursday for toddler group, but we will serve them, look after them, pray for them – and do it with joy.



We are called to be God's people in this world – in prayer, worship, love, support, protest. The Magnificat is not just a beautiful piece of music, it is a manifesto of a different world, a just world, a fair world. I am not going to comment on the one rule for us, one rule for them referring to Christmas Parties – I'm almost too tired to protest - but this picture from Unicef reminds us where we are.

I suspect that a newly pregnant Mary, unable to understand what was happening, and with no loving partner to lean on, share with, was even more shattered than I am. We know that many, many people are tired – worn out – and they will keep going. This is the alternative Collect we could have used today. It sums up where we are, and what God will with us.

Eternal God,
 as Mary waited for the birth of your Son,
 so we wait for his coming in glory;
 bring us through the birth pangs of this present age
 to see, with her, our great salvation
 in Jesus Christ our Lord.
 Amen.

Peter Barham
 18 December 2021