

## The Fourth Sunday of Advent, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2011 – ‘Greetings Favoured One’

Reading: Luke 1: 26-38

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

So we here we are; one week to go, Christmas most definitely in the air, and even our usually somber Advent readings seem to have given up any attempt to hold the line. The gospel story of the Annunciation – the visit to Mary by the angel Gabriel - which we officially celebrated nine months ago, has a distinctly Christmas feeling about it as it drags us closer to the what seems like the main event.

For most of us I suspect the obvious thing about Mary is encapsulated in that final verse of today's reading "Let it be with me according to your word." Mary holds a unique place in the history and tradition of the Church as the woman who said yes. Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has noted that Mary is one of only three human individuals named in the Nicene Creed – Jesus, Mary and Pontius Pilate; Pilate who said no and Mary who said yes. Mary is the woman who says yes to God and in doing so takes a leading role in irrevocably changing the course of human history.

But before Mary could say yes, there first had to be this: "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you."

"Greetings favoured one." When we hear the story of the Annunciation, when we think about Mary's role in the Christmas story, my suspicion is that we tend to go directly to the 'yes', but if we stop to think about it I think we will begin to recognise that the ground between "Greetings favoured one" and "yes" is vast and hilly, and we get a glimpse of that journey in Mary's initial response to Gabriel's greeting; "she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

"Much perplexed by his words." There is often a wonderful sense of understatement to the way the gospel story is told. Put yourself in Mary's shoes for a moment; an angel of the Lord has appeared out of nowhere and says "Greetings favoured one, the Lord is with you." Really? Would perplexed adequately sum up your response to this greeting? I suspect perplexed doesn't even scratch the surface of how I would respond in Mary's place, but then Gabriel goes on to tell her not to be afraid because she has found favour with God and now she's going to have a baby, and here's what you're going to call him – oh, by the way, it's a boy – and God is going to give him the throne of one of the best known kings in her nation's history, even though he's been dead for centuries and, oh yes, that's right, the Roman's actually control Israel now, but apparently this soon-to-be-born divine son is going to reinstate the monarchy and reign forever. To all of which Mary responds, "but hang on, I'm a virgin."

It's not that surprising I suppose that Mary would pick up on that particular detail, but really, let's face it, whether or not she was a virgin is just one of lots of questions that surely have to be asked here. What's being predicted isn't just unlikely, after all, it's impossible. Virgin's don't give birth, babies aren't God, and they don't reclaim dead king's thrones or live forever. And on the personal front, Mary's a woman. That might sound necessary for the giving birth part, but if you're looking to change the world why choose a

woman in a society that values women just a little less than the family livestock? And she was almost certainly quite poor. And I'm quite poor, which in her culture meant exactly the opposite of being favoured by God. And she didn't come from the right family, or the right town, and she had a fiancée who probably wasn't going to be thrilled. These things just don't happen, can't happen, and yet, here it is.

"Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." To be favoured is to be preferred, picked, chosen. Imagine, for a moment, what it meant to someone like Mary to be favoured by God. Now imagine what it might be like for you.

I think we hear about Mary and we think 'Mother of God' or maybe just 'Mother of Jesus'. Whichever it is, she's still pretty special, pretty unique, someone who stands out as a giant, if you like, in the story of our faith, and all that is true. Mary says 'yes' and everything changes forever, so yes, that makes her special, which is quite amazing, and even more so when we realise how normal and ordinary she was to begin with.

We're not surprised by that really of course. We're not surprised because we've read the whole book and we know God specialises in choosing ordinary people to do extraordinary things. We know the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Moses and David, and we know the stories of Peter and Paul and even some of the saints who came after the biblical period, normal people who became special people because God called them to do incredible, impossible, things. But do we believe that God still does that?

David Lose, a contemporary biblical commentator, poses this question: "Do you believe that God is still active in the world?"

It's an important question. Do you believe that the same God who is restless and active and involved in the world of the Bible is still the same today? I'm getting a few nods, so here's another David Lose question, thinking about Mary and the Annunciation; "Do we think God is done interrupting people's lives to use them for the health of the world, or might we imagine that God is still doing things just like this?" Do we think that? Still a few nods, ok, one more question, this time from me; "Do you think God is doing this to you?"

This, I suspect, is where things get a little tricky for us all. Sure, we want to believe God is still active in the world. God knows after the year almost gone we need to believe that, even if it's hard. And yes, we can say that God is still favouring and calling ordinary people to do extraordinary things, but could those people be us? You maybe, but me? Can I really believe that God is calling me to do something impossible and maybe change the world? How does that feel?

I suspect that's how Mary felt. How can you God say to me Mary have this baby? Do this thing? Live this life? Be this person? In our reading Mary goes from perplexed to 'here I am' in a matter of nine verses, but I suspect it was the longest journey of her life. What did she go through? How many doubts did she face? And what finally led her to the yes that we take for granted in her story, but question, I suspect, in our own?

"Greetings favoured one." As we enter this final week of Advent, as we turn our faces to Bethlehem, as we start, or maybe continue, to hum Christmas carols and think about presents and cake and all the things that make our own Christmas a special one, I invite

you to also think about this; “the Lord is with you.” The same God who sent Gabriel to Mary is with us still. The same God who said “bear my Son” speaks to us still. The same God who favoured a poor young girl, from a nowhere town, with a nothing reputation, this same God is still around, present, active, involved in the world and in us. How do we respond? How do we get from “who me?” to “here am I”?

There is a fear in this I suspect, or there should be. We know what saying yes to God can mean. We’ve read about and celebrated and remembered lots of people who have done that, and we know that none of them had an easy ride, and many of them met a sticky end, and more often than not being favoured by God is a two-edged sword. But there’s the other edge as well; to be noticed by God, to be known by God, to be called by God to partner in the business of changing the world, this is more than meaningful work, this is work that creates true meaning.

Greetings favoured ones. The Lord is with you.