

“The Angel Gabriel” a sermon based on Luke 1:26-38 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 20 December 2020.

“The angel and the girl are met.

Earth was the only meeting place.
For the embodied never yet
Travelled beyond the shore of space.

The eternal spirits in freedom go.
See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,
Each reflects the other’s face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there. He’s come to her
From far beyond the farthest star,
Feathered through time. Immediacy
Of strangest strangeness is the bliss
That from their limbs all movement takes.
Yet the increasing rapture brings
So great a wonder that it makes
Each feather tremble on his wings.

Outside the window footsteps fall
Into the ordinary day
And with the sun along the wall
Pursue their unreturning way.
Sound’s perpetual roundabout
Rolls its numbered octaves out
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune.

But through the endless afternoon
These neither speak nor movement make,
But stare into their deepening trance
As if their gaze would never break.” Edwin Muir’s, *The Annunciation*

Last Sunday morning there were angels everywhere. Some with haloes and wings; some without. We sang about angels. We heard about angels. All these angels got me thinking. Often in worship my imagination goes into overload with the multiplicity of images. And I work hard to connect those images, like the image of angel, with the concreteness of my everyday living. Worship is one of those times when we range free in our minds because not everything in worship holds our attention. We wander off. We are meant to wander off. That is part of what it means to pray in worship. The wandering off helps us connect what we hear with what we live. Well, last Sunday all the talk of angels took me to a memory of just a few weeks ago. I was standing in the park behind the church looking across the road. And there was a person sitting on the footpath, their back against the wall of one of the shops. They seemed to be in some kind of need. People were walking past them, but a person came along, and bent down, then knelt down, then sat down, and the two of them became involved in a conversation of a kind. Now when I thought of angels last Sunday, my imagination immediately took me there. A person attending to another person sitting on a footpath, leaning against a shop wall.

Then I wondered where else I had seen that happen. I thought of times I had seen people enter into another person's world respectfully. I thought of sitting outside a house in the north of Sri Lanka as a father told us of how his son left weeks before to make contact with "people smugglers" to whom he had paid precious money, to leave illegally in the night to travel on a rickety boat thousands of kilometres in the hope of reaching Australia. He asked if we had heard of his son. A truth only learned because local church people had earned the trust of a man bound by desperation. And I thought of people who had been angels to me, who bent down to me, knelt down to me, sat beside me, sometimes to surprise me with a truth. When our peculiar gifts are affirmed, when people don't try to fit us into a box of narrow normality, what a difference it makes. So that is what I was thinking about during worship last Sunday.

So we come today to the annunciation, the interaction between Gabriel and Mary. Notice how they are portrayed in this art (art is then posted on our screens):

- The ordinariness of the angel ... an angel with lumpy knees;
- A portrayal that suggests how awkward the conversation was – a young woman almost cowering in her room, in fear as Gabriel seeks to be gentle;
- Art by the Dominican, Fra Angelico - a hushed, private conversation, an intimate encounter; they are inclined towards each other, sharing confidences. The winged Gabriel, a messenger of God, appears to bow to Mary while she, sits on what looks to be a milking stool. The angel set lower than Mary, coming respectfully, fearfully even, each feather trembling perhaps;

Frederick Buechner, the Presbyterian minister turned author, writing of Gabriel ... "She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl." I wonder if you have been part of conversations like that, when a call came, an invitation, when someone saw you as somehow favoured, somehow blessed, and you sensed the risks that would come if you said yes, how your life would change. In ordinary ways, small and big, Gabriels invite us to that yes, altering what seemed fixed and predictable. Significant in Luke's account is that Mary speaks. She talks back. It is not an easy yes. Hardly surprising given the social and physical strain that would come for a poor pregnant girl in ancient Palestine. Imagine Mary's pregnant body, continuing with the rhythms of a fishing community—cleaning, slicing, preparing. Imagine the strain on her back as she carried water from the well. Imagine the swelling of her feet as she planted and gathered the harvest during the late stages of pregnancy. Imagine the sweat dripping from her brow as she gathered grain and kneaded it for the evening meal. Then the social distancing and ridicule for an unwed pregnancy. Shame and self-doubt. Gabriel had to ensure the choice was genuine and free, that Mary was not being manipulated into this decision. That the invitation was genuine.

Annunciation by Denise Levertov

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.
But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.
Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?

Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.

More often
those moments
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.

But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.
She had been a child who played, ate, slept
like any other child—but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed
in joy not triumph.
Compassion and intelligence
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,
only asked
a simple, 'How can this be?'
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply,
the astounding ministry she was offered:
to bear in her womb
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
in hidden, finite inwardness,

nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power—
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.

Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love—
but who was God.
This was the moment no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,
Spirit,
suspended,
waiting.

She did not cry, 'I cannot. I am not worthy,'
Nor, 'I have not the strength.'
She did not submit with gritted teeth,
raging, coerced.

Bravest of all humans,
consent illumined her.
The room filled with its light,
the lily glowed in it,
and the iridescent wings.

Consent,
courage unparalleled,
opened her utterly.

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