

Advent 4

There are a few moments in the Christian calendar when we are given a second bite at something and this Sunday is one of them. On Corpus Christi, for example, we reflect on the paramount importance of the Eucharist in Christian life apart from the liturgical frenzy of Holy Week. Today we revisit the Annunciation. We keep the feast on 25 March, working back with plodding exactitude nine months from Christmas. But in Advent, we telescope the whole history of salvation into a month: Patriarchs, Prophets and John the Baptist follow one another in quick succession and last, today, Our Lady Mary.

This is actually the second annunciation or announcement scene in Luke: the first is the promise of John the Baptist's birth to Zechariah, also by an angel, and the two encounters are carefully linked. Each is part of a larger sequence in which Luke emphasizes both the importance of John and his subordination to Jesus. John's mother was elderly and barren, yet God caused her to conceive: now by his Spirit he will cause a *Virgin* to conceive, for 'nothing is impossible to God'. Elizabeth's child will be great in the sight of the Lord; *Mary's* child will be called the Son of the Most High, and God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. John will make ready a people prepared for the Lord, but *Jesus* will rule over the house of Jacob forever. John's father *questions* his angelic visitor and is deprived of speech as a result; Mary *believes*, and commits herself to the purposes of God.

The whole story hinges on her 'yes' and the best devotion to Mary is one that leads us to do what she did, to say yes to accepting Jesus into our lives. Mary always points us to Christ: she too needed to be saved by Christ, but we believe had already been achieved in her Conception.

What does it mean to say that Jesus saves us? We tend to gloss over this language of salvation or redemption, which comes from a world where slavery is normal and freedom must be bought. It has had a corrosive effect on some Christian theology. As I wrote in last month's Parish Paper, we don't believe the doctrine of Penal Substitutionary Atonement, held by many Evangelicals. Penal Substitutionary Atonement teaches that every human being is 'corrupted by sin' which 'incurs divine wrath and judgement', resulting in 'eternal condemnation'. Salvation is then won from this wrathful and condemning God by what is, in effect, a human sacrifice – that of God's own Son who has taken human form for the purpose. This is, the theory goes, 'the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross, dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God'.

This abusive theology depends on a hopelessly strained reading of a handful of scattered New Testament verses. Its real origin is psychological, in the Reformers' image of God as a wrathful and condemning king, in that world where we were subjects not citizens, where slavery was very close to everyone. Luther recognised that we could not earn forgiveness from such a king by good works or by any other means of our own, but assumed that forgiveness still had to be paid for. The death of Jesus on the cross, resembling an Old Testament sacrifice, provided the mechanism, the answer to this alleged problem. But a more holistic reading of the New Testament shows that this is imposed on the Cross from

outside. The life and work of Jesus, taken as a whole, is a bold announcement that God is compassionate and forgiving, not wrathful and condemnatory. Luther and St Paul were right to assert that we can't earn relationship with God by our own efforts. But the good news, the Gospel, is not that Jesus *earned* it for us, but that it is a free and entirely unwarranted *gift* of grace from a compassionate God: the horror of the cross is a parable of what we do to others and even to God when we go wrong. Mary, the one filled with grace from her very Conception, is a sign of how we are simply *given* forgiveness and love, pointing us again and again to the source of that merciful love, her Son.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception helps us here. Mary was conceived without original sin, a concept best understood as a lack of *original righteousness* rather than an inherited taint: what's missing is a relationship which we are invited to accept. The Immaculate Conception teaches not about preservation from an inherited stain, but that Mary was *preserved* in her right-relatedness with God from her Conception. This is justification as taught by S Paul, who says a right relationship with God, 'righteousness' or 'justification', is always a gift, *grace*. Mary is seen to go before us in this gifted right relationship just as, in her Assumption, we see our resurrection prefigured. John Macquarrie suggested that another way to express this would be to say that Mary 'was always and already a recipient of grace' - 'full of grace' as the angelic salutation puts it. It was this grace that enabled Mary to give a true and considered 'Yes' to the request, conveyed by the Angel Gabriel, that she should consent to be the mother of the incarnate God.

Jesus *saves* us, not from some imagined stain to do with sex and procreation, but from shallow self-regard and disregard of others, from barren narcissism. Our prayers and good works will not earn that nor can they save others from those things, but they will help to make us more receptive to an encounter with pure grace, gifted unwarranted love, which can change us into the children of God we were born to be. Salvation is a recovery of our right relationship with God, a finding of our true selves; it is not so much *from* something as *for* something, *for* eternal life.

As we draw near to Christmas, the Advent readings take us to the brink of God's greatest gift, the Incarnation. The Old Testament prophecies, culminating in John the Baptist and his message, come to fulfilment, we believe, in Christ. The move from John the Baptist's ministry (last week) to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Annunciation story which we hear this morning looks like a chronological step back. But salvation history isn't linear: John sums up the whole of Old Testament prophecy and announces the impending event of Christ's coming, while Mary is the appointed agent *through whom* Christ enters the world.

The Annunciation brings us to the fulfilment of the Advent hope in which we prepare to rejoice, even in lockdown.