



The Annunciation
Rev Dr David Williams
Year B, The Annunciation
Isaiah 7: 10-14 Luke 1:26-38
14 April 2024

For Sunday 11 February 2024 I prepared a sermon that linked Waitangi Day and Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a covenant document with a reading from the prophet Isaiah on the requirements of ‘covenant people’ whose calling is to ‘make justice shine on the nations’, and ‘to open eyes that are blind’.

Having tested positive for COVID 19, I was absent that day and Cate Thorn read my notes for that sermon. I watched her doing so, and I thanked her for that. She also suggested I should actually turn up and deliver another sermon – in person this time. So here I am.

Looking at the 2024 Lectionary I spotted that 8th April was set down for the Feast of the Annunciation, long known in England and in Anglican churches as ‘Lady Day’. Wanting some Marian devotions from St Matthew’s Voices for Annunciation, and the Voices wanting a rest from Easter exertions on Low Sunday last week, Cate and I agreed that I would preach today. There is plenty of Marian material to choose from in the canon of church music. I appreciate the Voices’ choices.

From 8th April to 25th December 2024 is a slightly shorter period of pregnancy than the standard 9 months, but Annunciation is usually celebrated on 25th March – which is more precisely 9 months prior to Christmas Day. But Anglican churches do not interrupt the ceremonies of Holy Week or Easter week if March 25th falls in one of those weeks (as occurred this year).

For many centuries in most of Europe 25th March was New Year’s Day. Emperor Constantine decreed 25th December to be Christmas Day in 336

and over the next few centuries the idea developed that nine months before would be a good date to read the gospel we heard today. In time the feast for the beginning of the incarnation of Christ became the day to celebrate New Year's Day. From 1155 to 1752, the civil or legal year in England began on 25 March. In 1752 New Year's Day became 1 January in England and its colonies, though that had happened in Scotland in 1600. But, enough of 'trivial pursuits' information from a priest who happens to be a legal historian.

So why did I ask Cate if I could preach on the Annunciation readings today? The answer is Fr Trevor Huddleston. He was an Anglican monk from the Community of the Resurrection based in Mirfield, Yorkshire. His Community sent him to South Africa from 1940 to 1956. There are many South Africans who acknowledge that their lives were changed by Huddleston; one of the most famous is Hugh Masekela, for whom Huddleston provided his first trumpet as a 14-year-old pupil, Archbishop Desmond Tutu attributed his priestly calling to Fr Trevor's pastoral ministry to his mother and himself, and Huddleston worked very closely with Oliver Tambo, the African National Congress President during the years of exile from 1962 to 1990. Fr Huddleston became a bishop in Tanzania (and encouraged me to go there for my first university position in 1972), a bishop in Stepney (east London) and an Archbishop in Mauritius. From 1981 he was President of The British Anti-Apartheid Movement and, in that capacity, I met him on a few occasions. Back in 1956 he wrote a book that was a searing critique of the apartheid system that was being entrenched in South Africa during his time there, "Naught for your Comfort."

When I first decided to seek ordination as a priest in the mid-1960s I had just read this book and I wanted to go to Mirfield College for theological training. Part of the attraction was the smells and bells, the rituals of High Church Anglo-Catholicism. That appealed to me. But more than that was the deep commitment to social, economic and political justice found in Anglo-Catholic movements such as the 19th century Christian Socialists and the 20th century Jubilee Group whose priests such as Fr Kenneth Leech led prophetic communities existing on the margins of the church in

marginalised working class communities (such as East London used to be). Those involved in these movements saw their task as re-centring the institutional church: to bring the church back to its role and function as a place of equity for the poor and the oppressed; to be a voice for justice; to critique institutional power structures (secular and religious). And of course, the work and words of Fr Trevor Huddleston were a special inspiration for me.

In Anglo-Catholic circles the Feast of the Annunciation and Marian devotions were always of huge importance. But I never went to Mirfield for theological formation, and as it turned out I wasn't ordained until 1985 (deacon, in this church, Sir Paul Reeves' last ordination service before he became our Governor-General) and priest at the then incomplete Te Karaiti Te Pou Herenga Waka church in Mangere in 1986. So why might I want to preach about the Annunciation today in St Matthew-in-the-City rather than on the readings for the Third Sunday of Easter?

There is not a lot that historians can tell us about the historicity of the gospel narrative we have just listened to. Actually, there is not a lot that historians can tell us about whether there was even a man called Yeshua or Joshua or Jesus, let alone that he was crucified by the Roman authorities. And certainly, it is only explicitly Christian texts, some of which made it into the New Testament, that tell of a resurrection message that we are celebrating in this Easter season. Historians, of course, look for written sources and those Christian texts were compiled a good number of years after the events they purport to recount. That may not be enough to discount the historicity of the gospel stories entirely. In the Waitangi Tribunal I have heard a kaumatua recite 39 generations of whakapapa evidence without a single reference to any written material. The people whom the gospels describe were poor people who spoke Aramaic (not Hebrew or Greek or Latin) and most were illiterate. But illiterates can recount oral history and Luke's gospel is one version (among several) that record the Annunciation story as passed down to whoever wrote St Luke's gospel a few generations later.

For me, though, it is not the historicity or otherwise of angels speaking about a virgin birth that matters. There can be no historical doubt at all that a group of people in the land now called Palestine and/or Israel did believe in Jesus as Christ. They formed communities and grew in numbers over the decades, then centuries, that followed. They came to be called Christians and travelled in time to most corners of the earth. They proclaimed a number of messages – many of them uncomfortable messages then, and still uncomfortable now.

The personal salvation aspect of the Christian messages has never seemed to me to be paramount. Nor hopes or speculations about life after death. What matters most immediately is whether we do unto others as we would have them do unto us; and that we do that on this earth, here and now. What sort of actions are we called on to embrace? Luke's gospel puts the gospel imperatives in words attributed to Mary mother of Jesus. It is sometimes called the Song of Mary or the Canticle of Mary but I have always known it as the Magnificat. It is found a few verses on from this morning's gospel when Mary visits Elizabeth, soon to be the mother of John.

Anglicans used to recite (or listen to the singing of) the Magnificat more often than they do now. The Magnificat is a central feature of Evensong. I suspect there will be very few Evensong services anywhere in Aotearoa this evening. However, I returned to Auckland from St Isaac's Retreat Centre in the Hokianga yesterday. In the simple chapel there the Magnificat is chanted every day in Evening Prayers. Here are the Standard Version words:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
 and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
 to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

The verses of Mary's song that tell us about the nature of the God she was praising. God who has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the poor and humble; has filled the hungry and the rich have been sent away empty.

Here is a modern take on the words from a website called "Enfleshed":

<https://enfleshed.com/liturgy/magnificat/>

My soul is alive with thoughts of God.
What a wonder, Their liberating works.
Though the world has been harsh to me,
God has shown me kindness,
seen my worth,
and called me to courage.
Surely, those who come after me will call me blessed.
Even when my heart weighs heavy with grief,
still, so does hope abide with me.
Holy is the One who makes it so.
From generation to generation,
Love's Mercy is freely handed out;
none are beyond the borders of
God's transforming compassion.
The power of God is revealed
among those who labor for justice.

They humble the arrogant.
They turn unjust thrones into dust.
Their Wisdom is revealed in
the lives and truths of those on the margins.
God is a feast for the hungry.
God is the great redistributor of wealth and resources.
God is the ceasing of excessive and destructive production
that all the earth might rest.
Through exiles and enslavement,
famines and wars,
hurricanes and gun violence,
God is a companion in loss,
a deliverer from evil,
a lover whose touch restores.
This is the promise They made
to my ancestors,
to me,
to all the creatures and creations,
now and yet coming,
and in this promise,
I find my strength.
Come, Great Healer,
and be with us.

At their best Christian churches and peoples have sought to live up to the Magnificat messages. Being faith communities challenging unjust structures, refusing to despise the poor and outcasts, and seeking peace and love. From time to time reformations and prophetic movements have sought to re-centre those visions when institutional structures (both religious and secular) have enjoyed power and influence at the expense of the poor and needy.

In my observation, the clergy and people of St Matthew-in-the-City often have striven to implement the Magnificat messages. In my brief time as a priest licensed to this parish in the 1980s the stipendiary priests were Archdeacon John Mullane, Andrew Beyer and Susan Adams. They certainly

took to heart the Magnificat messages in a range of very important ways. At that time Fr Don Cowan was creating a City Mission centre in a decrepit old building next door. Now the City Mission is no longer in a decrepit building but the messages of the Magnificat remain absolutely central to the work being done there. Next week a new vicar will be inducted to this parish. I hope and pray that Magnificat messages will continue to inform the words and actions of the clergy and people of St Mathew's, and – as I spoke of in my February sermon – the people here will seek to be 'covenant people' whose calling is to 'make justice shine on the nations', and 'to open eyes that are blind'.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us. Amen.