



Rev Helen Jacobi

Theokotos

Luke 1:26-38

Feats of the Annunciation

21 March 2021

Unless you are of Roman Catholic upbringing you will probably have been surprised to hear the gospel reading we just heard read in the middle of Lent! We are used to hearing the story of the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary, the mother of Jesus, read at Christmas or the week before Christmas. When we do that - it is as if the angel appears to Mary one week and she gives birth the next! We package these events altogether and because of mystical nature of the visits of an angel and the birth story with more angels and foreign visitors guided by the star, we set them aside as pretty stories for Christmas cards.

But of course Mary was pregnant, like all women who carry a child, for 9 months, give or take a few days! So on Thursday it is 9 months till Christmas!

The Feast of the Annunciation, despite its fancy title, reminds us that Mary was pregnant. That she was pregnant like anyone else; with morning sickness, cravings, swollen ankles, worries and fears. She was also in great danger, she could have been stoned for adultery if Joseph had so accused her. She fled to her cousin Elizabeth and waited out her time.

I have recently enjoyed The Book of Longings by Sue Monk Kidd. It is a novel imagining that Jesus was married – not to Mary Magdalene! – but to a woman the author names Ana. When Ana is brought to the home of Jesus to be married and join Jesus’ household, she of course meets Mary. Jesus has told her “In Nazareth some say I’m Mary’s son, not Joseph’s. They say I was born from my mother’s fornication. Others say my father is Joseph, but that I was illicitly conceived before my parents married.” (p 143)

Mary welcomes Ana and teaches her how to do the household tasks required of her. Mary and her daughters and daughters in law run the household while Jesus and his brothers travel the region looking for work, returning to provide for the family. Mary is portrayed as an ordinary mother with an ordinary family. Ana, is unusual in that she has learnt to read and write and recording the stories of the women in her life and women from scripture becomes her life’s work. It is a book worth reading – it is a great novel – but it also helps to remind us of the humanity of Jesus and his mother.

Mary was a real young woman with her own hopes and fears. Mary acted strongly when presented with this challenge about which she knew nothing. She could have said no. Mary had a sense that this was a call on her life and that this was important. Mary is often portrayed in art and in our minds as someone passive, receiving the angel, receiving God’s blessing.

The description of the visit by the angel is set by Luke in a political landscape. Luke tells us that Joseph is of the house of David and that God is going to give to this child the throne of David.

That is a very strong claim both in the history of the people of Israel and vis a vis the Romans who controlled the current king, King Herod.

(The novel *The Book of Longings* paints a fascinating picture of King Herod).

So this mystical picture we might have in our minds of the “angel” and Mary being just about the baby we see on Christmas cards, is not the picture Luke writes. Luke writes of a change coming to the world Mary knows and the angels seeks Mary’s participation. Mary confidently replies “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Here am I/ here I am – those words are words normally heard in the mouths of the prophets and patriarchs of the OT.

Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel and Isaiah speak these words when addressed by God – here I am, send me. This is no one off, personal encounter for Mary, she is placed in the line of the patriarchs and prophets by the angel as she is commissioned for her task of bring Jesus into our world.

She speaks the words of the Magnificat – that the powerful will be brought low and the rich will go away empty.

She speaks as a prophet.

From then on she is not given much of a voice by the gospel writers but her presence continues as a mother and a follower of her son.

The Eastern Orthodox Church gives her the title Theotokos, or the Godbearer. She carries God within herself.

She carries Jesus for 9 months and then her role does not stop, she is his mother, she brings him up, teaches him, guides him as a mother, and she remains his mother to the end.

She is present at the foot of the cross, she carries her grief and pain, as she carried Jesus from the beginning.

So it is good to focus on Mary apart from Christmas; to allow her to grow in our minds and hearts into a more fulsome picture.

On the one hand we strip away all the tinsel and the artificial snow and on the other hand we raise her up as a prophet and as Theotokos, the one who carries God.

And since we are in Lent and next week is Palm Sunday we will soon see Mary at the foot of the cross, grieving like any mother.

We need to use our imaginations to fill in Mary's life from the birth stories to the cross.

To make her real and present for us.

As she was present for Jesus.