

## **Annunciation MMXVII Michael Silver**

This is an exceptionally important festival which, sadly, is often overlooked. Sometimes it occurs in Holy Week (or even Easter Week) and has to be shifted - and, in those years, most people forget about it entirely. Its awkward date, of course, is dependent upon our dating of Christmass. It is exactly nine months away, so start addressing your Christmass cards now!

So that is the reason why we have difficulties with actually celebrating it, but what, exactly, are we celebrating? Our subject today is only found in Luke's Gospel. We would learn that Mary was the mother of Jesus from other sources. Furthermore, we know about the application of prophecy to Mary and to the circumstances of Christ's birth from Matthew, but how this family history began is only to be found in Luke, and he begins with a sub-story - albeit a highly important sub-story. This messenger....? He could be a human herald (perhaps with a gift of prophecy) for that is all that "angel" means. The word (in both Greek and Hebrew) continued to have the sense of "messenger". Nevertheless, we know that this messenger was not human because Luke has already set the scene. Were we to write a Gospel, we might start with the biggest event and work back, but Luke starts with a lesser event, and he wants to relate it to the Temple setting. The Gospel writers, generally, take little interest in the Temple - not so Luke. Luke even has a tiny liturgical detail: Gabriel appears at the right side of the altar of incense.

We find it hard to picture the Temple, it was not really like any church that we have ever seen, and there seems to have been very little congregational participation. It must have been very dark in there, but most people remained in the outer courtyards of the place. The people who wondered why Zacharias was taking so long with his liturgical duty are in the inner courtyard. The sanctuary itself was only entered once a year, by the high-priest, awkwardly balancing a bucket of blood, a sprinkler, a censer, and an incense container or perhaps a large chunk of incense (and probably not allowed to simplify the matter by putting incense into the censer outside the sanctuary). The sacrifice that Zacharias was offering that day, however, was not for sin but for praise - the incense offering. And note, what he did there was simply action, there seem to have been no accompanying words because we are told that (after he lost his speech) he continued with these duties until it was time for him to return to the farm. In this incense offering there was an idea that one drew nearer to heaven (however heaven was conceived by the Temple priesthood). So normally; but now an element of heaven comes down to earth. We know that this messenger is supernatural, although Luke is not tempted to give us a supernatural description, only a supernatural message.

We first meet this Archangel Gabriel in the Book of Daniel. The idea of naming angels seems to have started about the time of its composition, which most scholars assign to the second century before Christ. Zacharias could therefore have recognised the name, although he may not have thought of the Book of Daniel as "biblical" (Jews never treated Daniel as one of the "prophets", only as part of the much more fluid category of "writings"). If Zacharias did view it as "biblical", that implied that, were he to read from it, he would have to wash his hands immediately afterwards. That did not apply to other books. Zacharias, for all we know, may not have been interested in angels, and that suspicion (a suspicion which we find in St. Paul, incidentally) may have accounted for his response and Gabriel's rather harsh words to this poor county priest. In fact, he really expresses no more incredulity than Marv herself, but Zacharias gets the rough end of all this, and is deprived of speech.

So now, after all this liturgical background and sub-story, we know who it is that brings word to Mary. Once more there is no supernatural description - there are no wings, no razzle-dazzle, just supernatural words. The opening words are strong, although hard to render into the way we speak today. We do not say "hail" to anyone, and if we said "greetings", I suppose that people would think that we were being rather larky, skittish, or plain silly. Then come those even more difficult words "full of grace". The King James

Version, as used here, has a rather clumsy circumlocution - "Hail, thou that art highly favoured". For it respects the original Greek rather than the Vulgate, though it misses the play on words which Luke contrived. The other possibility is that the translation panel for Luke is rather more Reformation-minded than some of its colleagues, and does not like the idea that Mary, a mere creature, is full of grace. We here say "full of grace" after the liturgy, but not at the Gospel!

Yet the most significant words of all from Gabriel are not found in Luke but in Matthew. Matthew, in all probability, did not know the tradition on which Luke draws, but he does know of a tradition in which Gabriel appears to Joseph in a dream where Joseph is commanded to go ahead with his marriage to Mary, despite her expecting a child which he certainly had not fathered. There is exactly the same emphasis on naming the child: "Thou shalt call his name Jesus; for it is he that shall save his people from their sins." [Mt. 1:21]

This is a clarion call to us - and most especially at this season, for this "saving His people from their sins" is what Holy Week and the resurrection are all about. It has to be admitted that we do not find quite the emphasis on sin in the Old Testament that we do in the New, although different books and different passages vary in the significance that they attach to transgression. We might say that a fairly typical Old Testament passage is the beautiful Psalm 103: "As far as the East is from the West, so far hath He removed our sins from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust." [Ps. 103:12ff.]

We often think of the Blessed Virgin as the Second Eve, the mother of all who live the resurrection life, through her obedience - in contrast to the first Eve's rebellion. However legitimate and impressive such a consideration as this may be, we do not find many raw materials for this in Luke himself. Generally, when it comes to sin, he rather follows the line of Psalm 103. Of course he reports some harsher warnings about sin in the parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus. He also has the most conspicuous act of repentance of all set in the scene of the Crucifixion, so sin is serious for Luke, but it does not get the same prominence as it does, say, in St. Paul (whose companion he seems to have been). And Luke would not necessarily be thinking in terms of the expulsion from Paradise as we find this idea appearing as we approach the New Testament period. Possibly IV Esdras (found in Church of England Bibles as II Esdras in the Apocrypha, not treated as biblical by Rome and the Orthodox) is the most fertile ground in this respect (though it probably dates from about 100 AD, so after both Christ and St. Paul), e.g. "O thou Adam, what hast thou done? For though it was thou that sinned, the evil is not fallen on thee alone, but upon all of us that come of thee." [IV Esdras 7:48/118]

So, we think of the angel's words carrying even greater significance in the address to Joseph as Matthew reports them: "For He shall save His people from their sins." This festival of the Annunciation, then, marks a great transition as we come to see more of the cost of God's love for us and His forgiveness of us, for we know that this joyful greeting to Mary would unfold in a terrible drama. This festival is just the beginning, but such is the over-lap of the Christian Year that we shall soon see the end.