

Advent Encounters
Session 1
Gabriel and Mary: God requests
Luke 1:26 – 38



Start by reading this very familiar passage from Luke's gospel, Luke 1:26 – 38

Do you have anything general you want to say immediately after reading this? (We will be thinking about some of the details as we go on through the session)

A little about the characters in this encounter...starting with Gabriel.

With apologies to Shakespeare, ***Who is Gabriel, what is he?***

*'The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
with wings as drifted snow, with eyes aflame'*

begins the beautiful C13th Basque carol * and in two lines we are introduced to the fact and fiction of Gabriel.

From heaven, yes. And the wings? Probably not!

Gabriel is one of only two archangels mentioned by name in the canonical Bible. (The other is Michael and there are more in the ancient Hebrew religious text, the Book of Enoch).

Gabriel first appears in chapter 8 of the Book of Daniel (he of Lions' Den fame). As Daniel is struggling to understand the meaning of a vision of a ram and a goat, he hears a voice "Gabriel, help this man understand the vision". Daniel tells us that he then sees a being standing beside him, explaining what Daniel has seen. This being has the appearance of a man....but one who frightens Daniel.

It is clear from this first appearance that Gabriel is an angel with a specific job description – to convey a particular message directly from God to a named human being.

So it's not surprising that the next time we meet Gabriel is when God sends him to the Jerusalem Temple, to tell the priest Zechariah that he and his elderly wife will have a son (Luke 1:18-20). Like Daniel, Zechariah is terrified at the sight of Gabriel (v 12) but is so gobsmacked at God's message that he can't help asking "How will I know this?"

By his reply (v 19-20), we learn that Gabriel stands in the presence of God, he is God's message-bearer that he has a certain amount of power over human beings...

Gabriel's most famous appearance, however, is when he is sent to the obscure little town of Nazareth in the vast Roman Empire, to find a 14/15 year old girl called Mary, to bring her a request from God. This encounter merits a fleeting reference in Matthew's gospel (Matt 20:21) but it is Luke who is responsible for this event being remembered in every Christmas service of Nine (or fewer!) Lessons and Carols.

What image / ideas come to mind when you hear the word "angel"?

Where do these come from?

What part do angels seem to play in God's world – both the heavenly and earthly realms? Does God still use angels?

Why do some people seem to find it easier/ more acceptable to "believe in " angels than in God?

** Do listen to this carol! Try Kings College Cambridge choir on YouTube for the full effect and note that Mary is referred to as 'most highly favoured lady, NOT – as we always sang – most highly flavoured gravy'...*

And who is Mary?

The gospels don't give much away about Mary!

After the birth of Jesus, we get glimpses of her in the accounts of his childhood and in John's gospel (only in John's gospel), we read that she played a crucial role at the Cana wedding (John 2; 1-12) but we do not see her again until she follows Jesus to Jerusalem and stands at the foot of the cross.

Before he dies, Jesus commends Mary to the care of the beloved disciple, John and tradition has it that she went to live in his household, dying in Ephesus, in present day Turkey, where John is also said to have died. You can visit "Mary's house", now a Catholic shrine.

From the apocryphal Book of James, dating from around the C2nd, we learn that Mary's parents were Joachim and Ann but the gospels record nothing of her lineage. The important thing for them about Mary was what she did, not her background – apart from the claim that she was a virgin.

This has traditionally put gospel readers into one of two camps - either taking Luke's claim literally or dismissing it as untrue. So let's think about this for a moment

We know from historic records that in the C1st, the Jerusalem Temple needed more than our cathedral vergers today to keep things going! There would have been a huge amount of work involved just in making and maintaining vestments – sewing, weaving, mending and then regularly washing the garments. (Think of all those animal sacrifices: there would have been a lot of blood stains on the priests' garments.)

Jewish tradition holds that these tasks were done by a group of girls / young women trained for the job. (Can we imagine the male priests in that society washing their own vestments?? !)

Again according to Jewish tradition, the girls who made up this group would have been recruited from respectable Jewish families, brought up according to the Law. This was important, as another part of their role was to offer liturgical prayer.

We have some scriptural evidence to support the claim that there were special women who ministered in the Temple complex. We read of women who watch/ wait/ serve/ minister at the tent of meeting (Exodus 38:8, I Samuel 2:22) and in 2 Maccabees (the Apocrypha again), the women "kept indoors" (2 Macc 3:19-20 NRSV) and who prayed as the tax collector Heliodorus planned to rob the Temple, may well have been from this group.

These women were sent to live in the Temple complex (possibly the Court of Women), probably from as early an age as four or five and, although there were much older women – widows such as Anna (Luke 2:36-37) – most girls would expect to leave by the age of around fourteen

As we have noted, the gospels are not interested in Mary until she is visited by Gabriel – but, factoring in snippets from historical records and thinking about Jewish tradition – it seems entirely feasible that Mary was such a girl: a virgin who had served her time in Jerusalem and who had returned to her family in Nazareth in the

expectation that she would soon be betrothed and then married.
Then along comes Gabriel ...

If you were asked to paint a picture of Mary what would come to mind?

Posture? Expression? Colour?

Where have your ideas come from?

What would you want to convey by your painting?

Art – medieval paintings in particular – have a lot to answer for! Portrayed in her famous blue garments (blue a symbol of purity) and often with a serene, pious, ‘mystical’ expression on her face, this is the sort of image of Mary most of us have seen at some time.

What message about Mary do these artists’ impressions convey?

Luke himself paints a strong picture of Mary in the words he chooses to describe her – and her response to Gabriel.

What impression of Mary did Luke intend to convey?

Holding the gospel passage firmly in mind, let’s now imagine the thoughts of Gabriel and Mary before and during their encounter, starting with Gabriel.

Gabriel meets Mary

I suspected something was about to happen The worship of heaven had taken on a new quality of expectancy. We were tingling with excited anticipation that seemed to radiate from God’s throne. So I wasn’t surprised to hear God calling me. “Gabriel”

I stood before God’s throne, silent, overwhelmed by God’s glory, God’s splendour pouring over me, ready to hear who I was to visit and what was God’s message.... And I was AMAZED. God was preparing to go into God’s human world as a BABY! And be born to a girl called Mary, betrothed to an older man called Joseph but not yet married to him...

... We never really talked about getting married, my friends and me. We knew this would happen to almost all of us and I guess we all felt a mixture of excitement and fear, wondering who our father had in mind for us.

I had thought about the possible men in our family and frankly hoped none of them was in the running. We are a traditional family. I wouldn’t have much say if my father had made up his mind.

But he had to give such a huge dowry to my brother’s future father-in-law when that marriage was arranged, that he doesn’t have much money left. So, given that none of our family is wealthy, perhaps that explains why he chose Joseph for me. Joseph, the widower is a master craftsman and well set up and paying a pretty big dowry to my father for me. And he’s from our tribe even if not from our close family circle. I wonder if he will have children with me as he did with his first wife? ...

I had no idea what reception I would get, how Mary would react to my appearance or to God's message but I remembered the reactions of Daniel and Zechariah when they saw me, so I remembered to tell Mary not to be frightened...

... Looking back, it seems almost funny that that angel seemed more in awe of me than I was of ...him? It? How do you refer to an angel?

He (or it) told me not to be afraid but all I felt was a strong sense of ...peace? A bit as if I had God's arms wrapped around me and I knew everything would be alright. Somehow I knew I had a real choice – that God would never force this event on me – but I did have a question ...

... Her question "How will this be?" reminded me of Zechariah too but I had no thought of silencing Mary. I had more of God's message to give her ... and I knew God was waiting for her answer.

How long did we have to wait? I don't know! It seemed a very long time, but perhaps that was because I knew how beyond important her answer would be. I do know that while we waited, the worship of heaven was stilled. Everything was suspended in eternity's time and all fell silent. The echoing 'Holy, holy, holy' faded. All heaven held its' breath.

The human world touched me then as never before. I felt panic, as if I were human. God's message was a request, not an order. And I had no script if Mary said "No". There was no Plan B...

... I took some time – I don't know how much time – to let the angel's words sink in and then think how this could possibly happen. I was betrothed to Joseph but we hadn't yet ... become man and wife (if you know what I mean... Excuse my shyness but we don't really talk about these things.) I think I even asked the angel how this could happen. I didn't really understand all of the answer ... but if the Spirit of God could create the world, then I believed the same Spirit could do as the angel said. Then he (or it) reminded me of the amazing thing that had happened to my relative Elizabeth and suddenly I found myself saying that I would do as God had asked me.

The tumultuous noise of heaven – cries and shouts, cymbals, fanfares ,organ blasts as heaven exploded in praise and joy, in adoration of God and in bewildered, amazed awe at God's plan and Mary's acceptance – literally – blew me away.

'All heaven held its' breath'.

Luke tells us that, after the initial greetings, Gabriel presents Mary with a statement ('You will conceive...' v 30) but the end of the encounter (v38) strongly suggests that that Mary had a choice.

Was her 'Yes' to God's request a foregone conclusion?

And if she had said 'No'?

While there will never be as big a request from God to any other human being as the request God made to Mary, nevertheless we know that from the earliest days of God's interaction with creation that God has always made requests of God's children. God has not stopped doing this!

At different times in our lives these may be big asks, but often they are apparently small requests that we can easily ignore. But I believe there is an element of all heaven holding its' breath whenever God requests something of us.

Finally, in worship...

Let's remember that worship is coming to God with reverence and adoration. This can involve music, art, nature – it can also be a silent 'action' of our heart and mind.

So however you are moved to do so, spend some time with God in reverence and adoration.

Take some time to sit with the things of this session. ... Picture Gabriel encountering Mary. ... Give thanks for her response.

Ask God to make clear to you any request you may have ignored and for which God is awaiting your answer. And let your response be the start of your journey through this Advent.

The photograph at the beginning of this session is of a statue depicting Gabriel appearing to Mary, behind the Church of the Annunciation, Nazareth.