

Gabriel Visits Mary

It's four centuries since a prophet dared to declare, "thus sayeth the Lord". And then, one day, Gabriel comes to Israel. The archangel, The divine spokesperson. The Greeks would have called him Hermes. And to whom does the messenger of God himself, high ranking angel that he was, Gabriel comes to a priest. Not just any old priest. . . After all Zechariah and his wife were both described as righteous before God, 'blameless in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord' – which would include at the most basic level, the command 'hear O Israel...'

Zechariah now approaches the top of the stairway into the temple. Today is a once in a lifetime opportunity for this humble priest. There were eight thousand priests in Israel at this time. The Lot has fallen to him, something that should happen roughly every twenty five years; he is to offer incense in the temple, while a multitude of devout worshippers are praying outside. And as he approaches the altar of incense, an angel appears. This unexpected figure lavishes upon the humble priest a poetic cascade of gratuitous promise.

The son for which Zechariah had long prayed, is to be granted at this late hour. And what is more, this son is destined to play a key role in the restoration of Israel. The prophetic crescendo reaches its orchestral climax with the announcement that the son of Zechariah will prepare a people for the Lord! And here, at the very zenith of the archangel's glorious pronouncement, Zechariah's basic response is, 'I don't think so Gabriel!' Theophilus can almost hear the needle scratch across the soundtrack. This humble priest has stolen the archangel's thunder.

That is how the Gospel of Luke begins. God's message is taken to the person most likely to hear it, and it is shunned. And the Gospel passage that we heard today shows what Gabriel did next. Instead of going to the most faithful of Israelite priests, he goes to a young girl of about fourteen years, to announce that she will be host to the most celebrated teenage pregnancy in human history. Her son is going to be heir to the line of David. And what does this fourteen year old girl say in response? "How can this be – I've never slept with anyone?"

My first reaction on hearing that, is feeling sorry for Zechariah. All that Zechariah the righteous priest had asked was how his elderly wife would be able to conceive a son, and Gabriel says right – I'm taking your voice away until the baby is born because you are so slow to believe. But I never understood what was so different about Mary's response, because it is basically the same. "How can this be?" Why doesn't she get struck dumb by Gabriel? Maybe I am too much of a bloke to understand this.

It's quite hard for a bloke to put himself in the shoes of a fourteen year old girl. But it really is quite shocking. If an angel appeared to a fourteen year old girl and says, "You are going to conceive and bear a son", and you had never slept with anyone, would you not wonder what on earth was going to happen?

Well the angel reassures her with the promise of a virgin birth, and Mary will eventually burst into the song that we call the magnificat. But she is not told that she is going to become the mother of the second person of the Trinity. What is she told? That she is going to become the mother of the Son of the Most High, and that God shall give to him the throne of his father David, and that he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and that his kingdom shall have

no end. Mary is told, in other words, that her son is going to become the true King, and that it will be a kingdom that has no end.

What would you do as a fourteen year old girl, if you heard that? Remembering the context of first century Palestinian peasants, oppressed by the nasty Romans, desperate for liberation, desperate for a King like David.

I went to see Seth Stevens this week – who asked me to say Happy Christmas to everyone at Bloomsbury, and to thank them for all the support he has received this year. And Seth was talking in great detail about the historical context of first century Palestine – how desperate the people were for liberation – and something I had never thought of before. That unlike the nasty oppressors who had crushed them in the past, the Romans were not for turning. There was no way they were going to be defeated. The Roman empire was something new – and little acts of rebellion might work momentarily, but there would be no military power that would keep the Romans out of the province. And Seth's conclusion was that the Jews of Jesus' day had not understood this. That's why every few years there was popular support for a new Messiah, a new King in the style of David, who through military might would force the Romans out of the promised land. But this was impossible. The Romans were not like the Greeks who had been defeated a couple of centuries earlier. But the Jews did not understand this.

And in the early chapters of Luke, this is what we see. Remembering that Mary had not been told that she was about to give birth to the third member of the Trinity, but that she had been told that she was giving birth to a warrior King – in the line of David, who would establish a Kingdom. The only way to do that is by military force. She misunderstood, and quite naturally.

So when she bursts into the song that we call the Magnificat, which in Catholic and Anglican services is said every week, all she is doing is giving poetic voice to her misconceptions. The Magnificat – so beloved in our churches - is a poetic display of Mary's mistake. It celebrates the end of oppression at the hands Romans and wealthy Jewish collaborators. Although as the Gospel unfolds, those words become truer than even Mary imagined. Even she is among those who did not understand what Jesus is about.

If, at this stage of events, Mary understood anything more about her Son's mission than that of military conquest, it would be more of a miracle than being confronted with the archangel Gabriel! If you had said to Mary that her son would be a pacifist – I don't think she would have believed it. Because when a hostile force is oppressing your people by military might, what alternative can you find to violence? During my military days, this was the only way I could think. Imagine the second world war! What alternative was there to military action? There was no alternative. That is precisely how Mary, along with the rest of Israel, must have thought. And how do you think this fourteen year old girl would have reacted, if she had any inclination that the events surrounding the birth of her son would be remembered in future generations with the words, "peace on earth".

Well, if Christmas is celebrating peace, we are not doing a good job in our house. Once again, I have made Christmas presents for the children and this year it is not fighter planes but – even worse – it is guns. Replicas of small arms from world war two, for the children to run around with as they pretend to shoot each other. Almost the precise opposite of Christmas? Well, not if we take seriously Mary's assumptions of the birth of her son. Military force to

expel an evil dictatorship – what could be more appropriate as a present than the weapons used by soldiers fighting for justice in the second world war?

In fact, in France last week, demonstrations were held outside shops that sold toy guns, and educated middle class pacifists attacked shoppers outside a store where only less wealthy people could afford to shop. And as people outside were being interviewed, they didn't do what we tend to do in Britain and say, "ah, if you don't buy them a gun they'll only make one in their imagination." They said, these guns will only make children violent if you leave your children to be brought up by their toys. These guns will only make children violent if you leave them to be brought up by their toys. And that is a far greater critique.

The reality is that you don't need to teach children to fight. It is the same with all animals. Fighting is basic to our human nature. Peace is not the product of suppressing that nature. A love of peace is the fruit of hard work, of learning boundaries. Children, especially boys at the age mine are, are going to fight, to play fighting, to love fighting. And what you learn from fighting is where boundaries lie. You learn when you go too far. You learn about hurting others and being hurt by others. And if you suppress that fighting altogether, how are those lessons learnt? It is not toy guns that make violent people.

And some of the most violent people I have encountered have been pacifists, who draw a simple straight line between guns and violence. Even in churches, as a young soldier I was rebuked by a bunch of university students because of my career. And all I could remember as a soldier without two A levels to rub together, was feeling bullied! You don't need guns to be violent.

And I speak here as an ex military unarmed combat instructor. Violence is not born from playing with guns in infancy.

Violence is born when you see your family killed by a rocket that should never have been aimed at your town.

Violence is born when you fail to learn boundaries in your interactions with others.

Violence is born when you have never learned about the consequences that your words and actions have upon other people.

But in some situations it seems that violence is the only option. It would have been the only option available to someone like Mary and everyone other first century Palestinian Jew who believed in a coming king from the line of the King who epitomised Jewish military conquest, King David.

But when this Messiah comes, he brings an alternative to the violence that had seemed like the only way. And what strikes us about Mary in this passage is that, given her assumptions about how the world must work, assumptions we hear voiced in the Magnificat, Mary has the capacity for her mind to be changed. She has the ability to have her prejudices remade. And that ability to hear, to listen, to be remade, comes out in that phrase, "let it be to me according to your will."

This is what makes Mary a better listener than even the godliest priest. – let it be to me...

This is what makes her stand out from those who could see no alternative to the violence that was necessary for the liberation of Israel. – let it be to me ...

This is what makes Mary an example for everyone who longs for God to act in a world plagued by injustice – let it be to me...