

The Annunciation

(Luke 1:26 — 38)

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The story of the Annunciation appears in only one Gospel, (though there it takes up thirteen verses), and its absence from the other three is matched by an indifference to the event which is fairly widespread in the Reformed churches. Until 1751, the Feast of the Annunciation, fixed on 25 March so as to come exactly nine months before Christmas, was counted as the beginning of the calendar year, but since then it has fallen into almost total oblivion, remembered only as an appendage to the Christmas story which might be used to heighten the mysterious quality of the Nativity.

Of course, this is true only of Protestant churches. Roman Catholicism has never abandoned an awareness of the Annunciation as a distinct event in its own right. Indeed, the Roman church might be said to have gone off in the opposite direction and placed far too much emphasis on Mary. The story of the Annunciation is the slender basis which it has found in Scripture for a doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (of Mary), and from there it is but a short step to a belief in her physical Assumption. The place of Mary in Christian teaching is a subject which cannot be avoided when the Annunciation is being considered. It is quite possibly true that modern Roman Catholicism has recoiled from the extreme forms of Mariolatry which are enshrined in monuments like Lourdes, but although the question has not yet surfaced much in ecumenical dialogue, it can hardly remain submerged for ever. Sooner or later we shall have to face the problem squarely, and Protestants will be obliged to give a positive account of their own understanding of Mary's role.

For this reason it is necessary to look carefully at the story as it is written in Luke's Gospel, and examine what its theological and Mariological implications are. As a first point, it is worth bearing in mind that Mary's visitation is placed alongside the story of the birth of John the Baptist.

It is clearly Luke's intention to relate the two in some way, since not only are Mary and Elizabeth described as kinswomen, but the first three months of Mary's pregnancy overlap with the last three of Elizabeth's, a period which the two women spent together (v. 56). More important still, the foetus of John the Baptist leapt in the womb at the approach of Mary, not because of her of course, but because of the Child whom she was carrying. Elizabeth understood this by revelation and gave expression to her experience by referring to Mary as 'the mother of my Lord' (v. 43), a nice touch which indicates that she knew that it was God Himself who had entered Mary's womb to be born.

There is a kind of parallel between the two women, in that both had experienced a miraculous conception, but beyond that, the differences are more important than the similarities. Elizabeth's pregnancy was of a type familiar from the Old Testament. It was abnormal in that she was old and barren, but the process of conception, as in the cases of Isaac and Samuel, followed the usual human pattern. With Mary though, the situation was quite different. She was young and potentially fertile, on the threshold of married life. Whereas in Elizabeth's case her pregnancy had 'taken away her shame', in Mary's case it had done the opposite — brought reproach and potential

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disgrace on a woman who had never known a man (Matthew 1:19).

In the conception of Jesus, the Holy Spirit not only violated 'the laws of nature' in a different way from His earlier miracles, He added to this an apparent disregard for proper religious feeling. In working out His purpose for our salvation, God demonstrated His sovereignty right from the start, over both nature and the requirements of the Law. It was a demonstration of His power which was to continue throughout the ministry of Jesus, provoking both wonder and scandal in the minds of those who were doing their best to obey the commands of God as they understood them.

Why did God behave in this way? One of the reasons must surely be that obedience is the keynote of the life of faith, even when that obedience goes against the customs of the time. We do not seem to suggest by this that true Christian service is antinomian. There was Scriptural warrant for the birth of the Messiah from a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), so the idea cannot have come as a complete surprise. Yet how difficult it can be to translate the theoretical promises of Scripture into the hard world of practice. Mary must have known that she had everything to lose, in human terms, if she obeyed the angel's voice. Her submission took great courage. It was not an antinomian gesture of defiance, but a humble acceptance of the Spirit's purpose, in spite of those like Joseph, who were more troubled by the demands of the letter of the Law. Antinomianism is rebellion for the sake of self-gratification, whereas Mary's action was one of submission in a spirit of self-sacrifice.

The precise means which God used to proclaim His intention was through the angel Gabriel. Here again, we are familiar with the procedure of revelation through angels from the Old Testament, and it was the same Gabriel who also appeared to Elizabeth (v. 19). Gabriel appears in the book of Daniel (8:16; 9:21) and is one of the four archangels named in the book of Enoch. We are not told why he should have been entrusted with this mission, although in Daniel he is described as having the form of a man, and in his appearance to Elizabeth he says that he stands in the presence of God (v. 19). It may be that as these two characteristics are typical of the glorified Christ, God chose him as the most suitable emissary to announce His great work to Mary. On the other hand, the angel does not speak of himself in his conversation with her. His one purpose is to inform Mary of her calling, and to explain in some measure what that was to involve.

It is perhaps worth recalling that there is a great concentration of significant Old Testament names in these few verses. The name had an importance in Biblical times which is hard to imagine nowadays, and one of the purposes of the Annunciation is to reveal the name of Jesus (v. 31). As we know, this corresponds to the Old Testament Joshua, a fact which, although its meaning is not explained in the text, can hardly have been accidental. In the space of a few verses, moreover, we are reminded of Joseph, David, Jacob and Miriam (Mary). It would probably be stretching the evidence to read anything into the names of Joseph and Mary, though it is at least interesting to note that both are linked to the time of bondage in Egypt. The name of Joshua is certainly to be associated with deliverance from the bondage of sin, in that the typological link between Egypt and the unregenerate life is too strong a theme in Scripture to be ignored.

In this connection it is important to notice that Moses is nowhere mentioned. Jesus did not come to emulate his work, but that of his successor, who led the house of Jacob out of the wilderness into the Promised Land. The never-ending kingdom which the angel promises to Mary's son is certainly the New Testament equivalent of this Promised Land, though it is to the lineage of David that he makes particular reference. Jesus was to be the inheritor of the promises made to David, a point which would cause considerable speculation and confusion during his later ministry. The disciples and others too, thought that He would be a secular ruler along the lines of Herod the Great, who also feared this possibility (Matthew 2:3). But the kingdom of Jesus was not of this world, just as His descent from David was exceptional. For note that it is nowhere stated that **Mary** was a descendant of David, but rather **Joseph**. It is therefore by a legal contract of marriage, not by blood inheritance, that Jesus would claim this inheritance. Joseph is not merely an accessory to the event, designed to give it respectability in the world's eyes. He too, has a role to play, as the one who confers historical and prophetic legitimacy, as well as legal paternity, on the infant in Mary's womb.

This is an important point because it brings out the fact that the reign of Christ is not linked in any direct way to His birth from Mary. The tendency to describe her as Queen of Heaven and other extravagant things is thus implicitly denied in Scripture, where the royal inheritance is expressly stated to have come through His human stepfather, not His mother.

The most contentious verse however is v. 28, where Gabriel describes Mary as 'highly favoured'. This translation of the Greek word *kecharitomene* is undoubtedly designed to offset the all too familiar Latin of the Vulgate, *gratia plena*, full of grace. We need not quarrel with Jerome over his rendering, in that Latin is a much less subtle language than Greek and has little choice of expression. We may also admit, on the Protestant side, that 'highly favoured' could obscure the word 'grace' (Greek: *charis*), which is undoubtedly present in *kecharitomene*, although to say that Mary was 'graced' would sound rather odd in modern English, and could easily convey a wrong impression of a different kind.

The difficulty with *gratia plena* though is more serious still. Roman Catholic theology has treated the Vulgate as equal to the original text for doctrinal purposes, and has gone on from there to describe Mary as sinless from birth, as co-redemptrix of the human race, and even as co-mediatrix in heaven! Now in no way is it possible to interpret *kecharitomene* like that. Whatever else may be said of the Greek verb (which is a perfect passive participle form), it is quite clear that Mary's grace had a beginning in time, and is therefore radically different from the eternal nature of her Son. The verb also implies that she is a recipient of grace, not a potential dispenser of it. Furthermore

the context makes it clear that she received God's grace for a particular purpose. Nowhere is there any suggestion that the divine favour may have exempted her from the need of salvation, still less that it may have placed her at the side of the Saviour in relation to the world!

At a deeper level of course we are confronted with the whole meaning of grace. The subject is too vast to be discussed in detail here, but the word implies an activity of God in the heart of man which he can only receive in a spirit of humble acceptance, because grace is by its nature quite undeserved. God's grace may impel us to action, as in the process of sanctification, but no human being can co-operate with God in a way which would make us contributors to our own salvation. It is this issue which lies at the heart of the debate. Mary may serve as a *model* for Christians, in that she responded obediently to the call of God, but in no way can she claim superiority over them.

Something of this is in fact hinted at in v. 29. Mary's reaction to the angel was one of disturbed surprise. Had she been 'full of grace', sinless from the womb, she would presumably have had the grace to cope with what would hardly have been an unexpected situation. But instead we find her amazed and upset, as any young girl would be in a similar position. The angel had to calm her fears first, by repeating that she had found favour with God, before informing her of the service which she was destined to perform. Furthermore, she is promised nothing for herself; it is *He* who will be called great, the Son of the Most High.

Here too it is much easier to interpret the text as an example of a Christian's response to God than as the testimony of a woman full of grace. Her troubled state is one which is common to many Christians, when they are called to a particular form of service for God. Which of us is sufficient for the task? How can we ever claim such a familiarity with the ways of God, that His work in our lives should never take us by surprise? Do we not see here a typical example of what happens to so many men and women who are called? Mary is closer in this respect to Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:6) than she is to Jesus, who never hesitated in His sense of calling (Luke 2:49).

Finally, we must not leave the story of the Annunciation without considering what it teaches about the work of the Trinity in the conception of Jesus. When Gabriel explains to Mary what will happen to her he says that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and that the power of the Most High will overshadow her, so that the fruit of her womb will be the Son of God. Here, implicitly, are the three Persons of the Trinity working together to bring about the miracle of the Incarnation. It is possible that 'the power of the Most High' is meant to be an alternative and parallel way of referring to the Holy Spirit, but even so, it merely emphasizes that He is the agent of the Most High, who in v. 32 is plainly equated with the Father. The point is not a trivial one, because the Incarnation was a work of God in the fulness of His Trinitarian being. We must never suppose that the Son left the other Persons behind, nor that there was any division in or deduction from the Godhead. The Son came to earth in order that, in fellowship with Him, we might know His fellowship with the Father and the Spirit, and share with them in the Trinitarian life of God. This too, is part of the Annunciation, and we must hold fast to it even as we contemplate the miracle of divine conception in the womb of God's servant Mary.