

Fourth Sunday of Advent

20.12.2020
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Introduction

An overall introduction to the Advent 2020 readings

One of our general principles in producing the weekly reflections for the Spirituality of Conflict project has been to avoid tying these too tightly to events current at the time of writing. Earlier this year however [the introduction to our Holy Week reflections](#) noted that in the light of the Covid19 pandemic it seemed wrong *'to blithely write as though this were a Holy Week 'like any other'; and indeed now, more than ever, we need the wisdom embedded in the multi-levelled and richly textured narratives of the Gospels to challenge, comfort and guide us.'*

That seems to be even more true of this Advent as we face renewed waves of infection with further lockdowns and restrictions, huge political upheavals around the world, and multiple uncertainties about what the next weeks and months will bring for us all. Never has the question "what is left of the night?" – asked of the watchman in Isaiah 21– seemed more pressing; never has the ambiguous reply of "Morning is coming, but also the night" seemed more resonant.

Advent, the season of waiting, is also a time of watching – of looking and attending – and the Advent readings for Year B all tell us something about aspects of this very human activity. The questions they point us toward and which weave back and forth through the texts – *How* do we look? *Where* are we looking? *What or who* are we looking for? *Why* are we looking? *What do we do with our seeing?* – are all pertinent ones for this time when so much is going on, as well as for us to consider in the context of developing a spirituality of conflict. Looking for God, for the signs of their Kingdom, is an essential element of an Incarnational spirituality and praxis.

Thus whilst not referring directly to the pandemic or other current events, these reflections are nevertheless influenced by them. Our hope is that, alongside our ongoing project of exploring conflict generally, they might also support reflection on the particular conflicts which the events of 2020 have exposed or heightened, as well as on our own responses and what we might need to amend, celebrate or strengthen in these. This too seems a very appropriate way of keeping Advent – of watching and waiting and encountering God's light in unexpected places and in ways which are sometimes comforting, sometimes challenging but always illuminating.

Introduction to Advent 4: Why do we need to look?

Through this year's Advent Gospel readings we have been asking ourselves questions about the nature and quality of our looking: *How* are we looking? *Where* are we turning our gaze? *What* are we looking for? At first sight it might seem that today's passage does not really have anything much to do with looking – after all, Gabriel knows where he is going and what the answer will be doesn't he! However the passage (and so one might also say, the Incarnation itself) hinges on an act of profound looking by Mary. Both this, and the fact that we often fail to notice it, point us towards what we could think of as the *meta* question which underlies all our others about looking – that of '*Why do we need to look?*' – and also suggest two possible answers for us to consider.

Preparation:

Read the passage through and then try and break the story down into tiny chapters by identifying different stages in the narrative. What title would you give to each chapter?

or

Look out some different images of the Annunciation (here are a few to get you started: [Lippi](#); [Simone Martini](#); [Botticelli](#); [Baldovinetti](#)) and then choose 4 or 5 and study them with particular attention to the looks and gestures of Gabriel and Mary. Are there differences between the pictures in this respect and if so, can you relate them to different moments in Luke's account? Does anything in this exercise make you look at today's Gospel passage in a different way?

or

Compare the responses of Mary to her angelic visitor with that of Zechariah in the immediately preceding annunciation story and list any significant differences that strike you. Does this give you any different insights into the story in today's Gospel passage?

Text

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Comment

Today’s familiar text has inspired a myriad paintings and poems – and of course it is foundational to the Christian narratives of Incarnation and salvation. However, this latter means that we can also have a tendency to completely collapse the passage into its end point: our attention is so firmly on the ‘yes’ and its consequences that we make Mary’s acquiescence contiguous with Gabriel’s greeting. But actually there is a complex journey between the two, at the heart of which is an act of the kind of ‘collected looking’ which we thought about in [Advent 1](#). Over the centuries both theologians and artists have tried to distinguish and describe these different stages between the “Greetings!” and the “Behold..” which bookend the encounter. One way we can break it down is as a set of 3 speeches by Gabriel and three corresponding responses in Mary:

G: Greetings M: questions provoking internal debate

G: Announcement M: questions provoking external interrogation

G: Explanation M: consideration followed by consent

There is a dangerous tendency to read this passage as though Mary’s response is a foregone conclusion – an acquiescence to an already inevitable (because divinely

ordained) course of events. But one of the things which Luke's account, if we break it down, highlights is Mary's *agency* in the encounter. Whereas in Matthew's Gospel Mary is a woman who is *talked about*, in Luke she is a woman who *thinks and talks for herself*. She is not a passive object to be used by someone with more power as part of a larger plan, but someone who can consider and weigh up what is being proposed and give or withhold consent. And surely this is right, since for the Incarnation to have any meaning or power it cannot begin with an act of coercion.

What Luke shows us in this passage is someone who engages in an act of profound, interrogative looking. The first stage of this comes in response, not to the angel's presence, but to his address (v29). The NRSV's 'perplexed' somewhat dilutes the force of the Greek *diatarass* (unique to this passage) which indicates being thoroughly and deeply disturbed – a perturbation which mirrors the intensity of Mary's internal debate. We don't know precisely what images and questions Gabriel's greeting sparks off – perhaps faint echoes of other salutations or events which were forerunners to divine calls; perhaps an acute awareness of her lack of any status that would be likely to be associated with 'finding favour'. What we do know however, from Luke's use of the verb *dialogizomai* (here translated as 'pondered'), is that she takes time to deliberate thoroughly with herself, musing over and examining all the different things which could lie behind this peculiar encounter and where it might possibly lead. As we will see in the Christmas readings, this type of questioning seems to be a characteristic trait of Mary.

We have no idea how much elapses before Gabriel continues (and our tendency to collapse the passage does not help us to hear any pauses in it) but there clearly comes a moment when he sees that Mary is ready to hear more and begins to elaborate his announcement. This time Mary's response is to move to external interrogation – something which St Bonaventure, in his commentary on Luke, approvingly designates 'most prudent'. It's worth noting here the contrast with Zechariah's question from the previous story. Like Mary he was also 'troubled' (though less thoroughly: the word used is simply *tarass* without the global comprehensiveness added by *dia*); but where he asks 'how will I *know*?' her question is the much more practical 'how will it *happen*?' This response, with its implied willingness to consider further, suggests a new and differently focussed phase of looking has commenced.

Gabriel's answer raises some serious issues for Mary to look at – especially considering her status as a betrothed woman, the proposed nature of the conception, and the punishment set out in law for violations of betrothal (see further on this [here](#)). How would her betrothed, her family, and her wider community respond? What possible fates awaited her? Could God really be at work in and through such an unlikely and precarious scenario? No wonder she needs to take the time to look, to reflect and weigh up, so that she can come to a properly considered decision. In this instance her looking leads her to answer in the affirmative – she transcends the fear of the likely risks and offers herself freely as a partner in God's proposed plan. But even if her looking had led her to another answer, it would still have been the same profound and informed act of self-determination.

I want to suggest therefore that the first important answer to the question of 'Why do we need to look?' is 'because we are *agents*'. We are not simply passive pawns caught up in things over which we have no control or objects to be manipulated by the will of others – the '*helpless Pieces of the Game He plays*' described in Omar Khayyam's 'Rubaiyat'. Instead we have control (even if sometimes not always completely) of our own actions and choices. Therefore we always have a *responsibility to look* – to consider, to weigh up, to balance, to try to understand – so that, whether in the context of conflict or more generally, we can act in a properly informed way. This is what Mary does – and it is one reason why the Incarnation *is* what it is.

The way we typically tend to read this passage points towards a second key answer to the question: we need to *actively look* because we are often very bad at *actually seeing*! This is closely related to what we were thinking about last week: what we see

is so often *not* – as we tend to assume – how the world actually is, but much more often a function of the unconsidered assumptions, beliefs and meta narratives which we carry with us. Moreover, just as with this story, these ‘end point’ understandings can have so powerful a hold that we collapse the whole narrative into them and fail to look properly at what else might be going on which might expand, enrich, or change our way of reading a situation – something which is particularly pertinent perhaps in the context of a conflict situation.

So then, we have a responsibility to look properly when we are exploring possibilities or making decisions; and we also need to be willing to look further when we are confronted with situations or people that challenge our understandings, upset our cherished ideas, or disrupt our comfortable and comforting narratives. In the response section below there are some suggested questions to consider around this – but you may well have others which are more helpful for you. As in previous weeks, this exercise is not intended to bring us down but to help us reflect in a more intentional way on how we look at different situations and what our responsibilities are in this respect.

Response

You might like to consider one or more of the following questions with respect to a specific conflict situation in which you are involved, to things which are currently happening in public life which you find concerning or challenging, or more generally to your 2020 Advent preparations.

Can I identify with the path which Mary takes in this narrative from my own experiences? What helps me to see when I need to stop and consider before moving on to the next step? What sorts of questions or perspectives are useful to consider if I am trying to move forwards in understanding a situation and deciding on appropriate action? Is this something I need to get more confident with? If so is there anything or anyone I can engage with to help me grow in this area?

Are there particular situations where I feel (or have felt) that I have no choice but to think or act in a certain way, or that I have no responsibility for how I understand or what I do? What effects does this have on these situations? Is this something which needs changing – and if so, how can I make a start with this and who might help me?

Are there areas where my sense of what is happening, or what a situation entails, is so strong that I feel no need to examine it further or more deeply? What effects does (or might) this have on the evolution of the situation? Do I have ideological touchstones or narrative lodestars which I won't allow to be challenged? If so why? Are there potential or actual dangers here that I can identify? Are any of these points of fixity something which I need to address and if so how can I approach this and who might help me if needed?

Prayer

Mary,
interrogator of archangels,

when we would prefer to think
that we simply have no choice,

rather than to acknowledge
our agency
and the responsibilities it brings,
help us to remember
the way you took the time to look
with deep attention
at the situation in which you found yourself;

help us to remember
the way in which you
listened and questioned
with fearless integrity
in order to see
what was being asked of you;

And as we remember your example
may we too
honour the situations
and the questions
which confront us
by looking properly
seeing clearly
and choosing consciously.
Amen.

Further Reading

If you don't know it then Denise Levertov's poem "Annunciation" is a beautiful reflection on this passage. You can find a copy [here](#)