

The Annunciation of the Lord
(Isaiah 7:10-14.8-10 / Luke 1:26-38)
04.04.2016

This year we celebrate the Annunciation of the Lord in the light of the Easter feast. Indeed, because the 25th March fell during Holy Week, it is now in the glow of the Paschal candle that we read the gospel account of the Annunciation unto Mary. I see this strong symbol as presenting us with an invitation to look at the Annunciation event in the light of the resurrection of Jesus.

It seems to me that just as the Risen Lord invited the Emmaus road travellers to read the whole message of the Scriptures in the light of His paschal mystery, so it is in this same light that He invites us to consider the mystery of the Annunciation today.

The Resurrection and the Annunciation were clearly connected in the ancient Church: iconography bears witness to this. The Eastern Churches were attentive to the links which exist between the two mysteries. In Christian art – including in the West – we often find triptychs which unite the Resurrection and the Annunciation. This is surely significant. When we think of these two events we see similarities. Both the Annunciation to Mary and the Resurrection of Jesus took place out of the sight of witnesses. The actual Annunciation event was an intimate encounter between Mary and her Lord through the intermediary of the angel. No one other than Mary was there. The Resurrection event itself was not seen either. In both the Annunciation and the Resurrection we are given to contemplate the new life of Jesus that came forth from a place of darkness.

In the Annunciation Christ entered the darkness of the womb in order to emerge in Bethlehem in the discreet way by which He came into this world, manifesting Himself in the helpless, naked infant Jesus. This coming of God into the world, born as man of the Virgin Mary, was witnessed only by a chosen few: Joseph to begin with and then shortly afterwards by a few humble shepherds and the Magi, those men from the East who came bearing gifts.

With His saving death Jesus entered into the darkness of the tomb in order to emerge clothed in resplendent light through His Resurrection. Eastern Orthodoxy brings together the Annunciation and birth of Jesus with His death and Resurrection in its liturgical chants – we see this especially in the chants used for the Good Friday liturgy of our Orthodox brothers and sisters. We also have an echo of it in the litanies sung at the Easter Vigil in the West. In these latter it is proclaimed that we are saved by Christ's coming into the world as man, by His incarnation and birth, together with His death on the cross and glorious Resurrection.

Out of the background of these insights emerges an image of Mary at the Annunciation as an icon of hope for the whole Church.

What Mary experienced at the Annunciation when the Holy Spirit came upon her – the Holy Spirit being the life-giving Spirit of Jesus – is nothing other than what the full accomplishment of Easter leads us to celebrate at Pentecost. The belief that Mary experienced the full outpouring of the Spirit at the Annunciation, when the angel told her the Holy Spirit would come upon her, explains Mary's absence from most Orthodox icons of the Pentecost event. Mary is not depicted with the Twelve receiving the Spirit in these icons, even though the Sacred Scriptures speak of her having been present in the Upper Room. This is because Mary is thought of as having already received the gift of the Spirit when the angel announced to her that she had been chosen to be the Mother of our God made man.

If Orthodox iconography has Mary absent where the Scriptures speak of her as having been present, Western spiritual tradition (taking up from some ancient Oriental traditions, such as

that of the Syrian Saints, Isaac and Ephrem) responds to this in its own way, by imagining the Risen Christ to have first appeared to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, before any other disciple – even though the Scriptures do not mention such an apparition. This is sometimes seen as just a pious opinion, but no less than six Doctors of the Church – including SS. Ambrose, Anselm and Albert the Great (easy names to remember since all begin with the letter A) – held that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was the first to have been graced by a visit from her Risen Son on Easter morn. This visit is considered to have been lived in great discretion and intimacy, to the extent that there is no record of it having taken place. Loving gestures are always lived in delicate ways. Total discretion befits such loving intimacy.

All this led Benedict XIV to declare at one point: *The Risen Lord is believed to have appeared first to Mary based on tradition proclaimed by ancient architectural and liturgical monuments, starting from Jerusalem itself.* Our own Congregation's abbey at Abu Gosh is entitled *Sainte Marie de la Resurrection.* This title would have us think of how Mary, the Mother of Jesus, lived and treasured in her heart the great mystery of her Son's glorious resurrection.

I remember being struck years ago when, as a youth, I was involved in *Christian Life Communities* by that passage in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola wherein Ignatius in his imaginative prayer assumes, as he puts it: *Jesus appeared in body and soul to His Blessed Mother immediately after rising from the dead.* In fact, Ignatius makes this Marian mystery the first of fourteen meditations on the risen life of Christ. What is all the more significant is that this is the key meditation which introduces the capstone, what we could call, the crowning of the Spiritual Exercises: *The Contemplation of Divine Love.* The point of this meditation for Ignatius is very important and should be grasped. It is so that we may learn from Mary that *love ought to be found in deed rather than just words* and, in my opinion, more important still, what Ignatius goes on to stress is this: *love consists in mutual interchange on either side.*

Can we talk of love of and/or believe in love if there are no signs of it? There are those who talk much of love, but fail to signify it. If I am honest, I would have to admit that I have encountered examples of this in my own life and, if I am to be honest, I would have to say that at this stage, I have begun to doubt if the love once spoken of is a reality at all. Words are cheap and, let's face it, they can be empty. The second point I flagged up from the Exercises as very important (mutuality) is one I come back to again and again. Love is not meant to be just a one way affair; there is meant to be mutual interchange in love. Love given should call forth a response from the one loved. I am not thinking in terms of a *this for that* exchange – a kind of commercial relationship – but rather a relationship in which there is an interchange: an exchange in which the totally free gift of love offered by the lover calls forth a totally free response on behalf of the one loved.

Mary lived this kind of response to God's call upon her life and His loving choice of her person already at the Annunciation when she responded in total freedom of heart: *Be it done to me in accordance with God's word.* St Bernard of Clairvaux emphasises how much God and the whole of creation depended upon this free will response on Mary's behalf. We all needed Mary to say *Yes* to God in order that the Word might be made flesh and dwell among us.

It is all this that has led the great spiritual masters over the centuries to say that Jesus opened His forty days of appearances on earth after the Resurrection with a visit to His Mother Mary before He visited anyone else. We could say that it is because these spiritual masters saw the Resurrection to be the fulfilment of God's promise to humanity *to be with us all always* (a promise reiterated by the Risen Jesus) that they had the Risen Christ first visit Mary. It had

been Mary's consent to God's call that had permitted the Incarnation which allowed God to be with us, known by the name-title *Emmanuel, God-is-with-us*. (That name title is rooted in Isaiah's prophecy heard in today's first reading.)

At the Annunciation Mary submitted her will by faith to the word of God. At the Resurrection, Mary's faith (representative of that of the whole community of believers which was to grow out of the Easter event – with each one of us today now included as members of that community) – was rewarded. The spiritual masters who think in terms of an unspoken visit of the Risen One to the Virgin Mother regard Mary's faith to have been rewarded by her actually seeing Her Risen Son and sharing a loving exchange of intimate greeting with Him.

If at the Annunciation Mary represented the whole human race needing to be redeemed, we could say that at the Resurrection she represented the human race welcoming God's gift of redemption.

At the Annunciation Mary became the link between God and humanity by allowing the Word to become flesh within her. We could say that by Mary's response to God's call in her life, she provided Jesus with the body that God took upon Himself so that He might share in our humanity.

To think of Mary welcoming the Risen Lord – which is a legitimate thought in our spiritual life through the practice of imaginative prayer (whatever one makes of the historicity of the imagined event, whether it ever actually happened at all, doesn't really matter) – has us nonetheless consider and enter into what must have been Mary's great joy to contemplate her Son, the Risen Christ.

Can we not well imagine Mary's happiness to welcome Her Lord and God, our Lord and God, and to see in Him the fulfilment of the promises made to Her at the Annunciation? The promises made to Mary by the angel were made to her on our behalf.

All this is what our reading of the Annunciation story in the light of the Risen Christ, symbolised by the proximity of the Paschal candle beside the Book of the Gospels, signifies for us this morning.

Let me conclude by referring to words some of us who are here used to sing at Bec on Easter night in the cloister of the abbey. As we stood before the image of the Virgin Mary, at the door of the ancient abbey church, we would make ours what is proclaimed in the lyrics of an ancient Orthodox chant: *L'ange chanta à la pleine de grâce: O Vierge pure, réjouis-toi. The angel sang to the one full of grace: O pure Virgin, rejoice!* These words are rooted in the Annunciation event. The chant goes on: *Je te dis, réjouis-toi, ton Fils est ressuscité du tombeau le troisième jour, relevant les morts. I say to you, rejoice, your Son is risen from the grave on the third day, raising up the dead.*

This chant imagines the angel of the Annunciation appearing anew to Mary to announce to her the news of the resurrection of her Son before anyone else would hear these glad tidings. Here at Rostrevor at the end of our long Easter Vigil – having listened to the story of salvation through the Scriptures and celebrated the Easter mysteries by renewing our baptismal promises and participating in the Eucharist – we make our way through the church to stand before the icon of the Theotokos in the Lady chapel and there we intone for the first time of the Easter season that ancient Gregorian chant which is sung each evening of the great fifty days of the One Great Day of Eastertide: *Regina Caeli laetare, Alleluia! Queen of heaven rejoice, Alleluia For He whom you were worthy to bear, Alleluia Has risen as He said, Alleluia Pray with and for us to God, Alleluia.*

Let us rejoice today. Let us leave this Eucharist as Christ-bearers, confident that the Risen Lord is with us, let us strive to live in a communion of love with all our brothers and sisters in the faith, expressing it not only by having recourse to words of prayer, but also through acts of service, acts of loving kindness. I repeat what I said earlier: words of love are easy and cheap; they need to be accompanied by deeds loving-kindness if the gospel message we echo is to be deemed credible.