



Homily

4th Sunday of Advent

2020

I wonder if any one of you here has been truly frightened? I've certainly known many occasions of anxiety and nerves. I have certainly known occasions of dread at not being sure I can cope with a certain situation – a death, funeral, a failure. As a child I was frightened of punishment on occasions. Real fear, I am not so sure.

And yet in this gospel story of the Annunciation Mary is frightened, otherwise why should Gabriel say to her “Do not be afraid?” Traditional paintings of the Annunciation are usually lacking in mobility. Mary is demure and still. The Angel Gabriel while unusual is not ordinary human terms – after all humans don't have wings, is gracious and unthreatening.

A painting of the Annunciation undertaken in the late nineteenth century by an American black artist called Henry Ossawa Tanner shows a Mary looking as though she has just been woken up in the middle of the night and wearing a dressing gown and sitting on crumpled sheets. Her face is overawed but there is something but she is steadfast in the face of her experience. In front of her is a blinding light. I suppose we might call it a vision and certainly we would call it some kind of spiritual experience.

Ancient angels were not beautiful elegant creatures from medieval paintings but were more likely to have been fierce animals on guard and drawn from ancient mythology. However the description here is more like we would call the numinous. It is more like what we call wonder and awe in God's presence, as described in the gifts of the Spirit, when the phrase 'Fear of the Lord' is used..

Gabriel is after all the messenger of God and if Mary was awe struck it is hardly surprising. And the message of Gabriel is overwhelming for Mary. She a young woman will give birth to God's son, not by human involvement of male love but by the over powering of the Holy Spirit. It is almost a defiance of her woman hood just when she is on the cusp of reaching her adult hood. May be in the religious language of the time this was not so extraordinary but it was certainly almost completely exceptional.

But there we have it. Mary was gifted this exceptional experience of something divine. Is this kind of thing unique to Mary? Yes insofar as she was told she would be the bearer of God. No in the sense that anyone of us can be open to a deep spiritual experience. When we feel we are in touch with something which is beyond the ordinary; when we feel we are suddenly aware of a something far greater than our immediate environment. As a small boy I still clearly recollect sitting at the edge of a corn field and being overwhelmed by the golden colour of the sheaves, the and corn blowing in the breeze and the summer heat. It gave me a sense of an unknown power out there. Music and art can transform us too, and beauty generally can transform us.

We feel in an unknown power which we dare to call God. At the Annunciation Mary in youthful beauty dared to call her experience, a message from God, intended for her personally.