

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

ANNUNCIATION

Watch night – 24th December 2013

Unusually, I was alone when the angelic visitor came. I was behind-hand with my daily tasks, very behind-hand, because that morning I had stumbled on the doorstep with the four gallon jar of water, and the amount of damage that much water can do in a mud-floored house has to be seen to be imagined. My clean clothes, set aside for mending, were spattered with mud; the earth floor was puddles, and the raised sleeping platform, where we unroll our beds each night, got the worst of the flood, so that there was the bedding to dry and the dais to be re-constructed. No wonder that my mother was cross with me. No wonder that she decreed that since it was my clumsiness that did the damage, I should be the one to put all right again.

So all day I had washed and dried clothes and bedding, and had mopped, mopped, mopped at the floor. A stone-floored house can have spilt water swept out of it. But it is mainly the Romans who live in such places and we who live with earthen floors know that to sweep out water means to sweep out the floor as well. I didn't mind the work: if I weren't doing that work it would be something else. But I did mind that it took so long. As the sun slipped across the sky I just knew I would not be finished by evening, and so would not be able to go with the family to the party for the naming of my new nephew, Joel. Dinah, my sister, had married well, into a priestly family, and I had been looking forward to admiring their fine home and enjoying their fine food. But it was not to be. The rest of the family changed into their best clothes – why were only my clothes affected by the mud? - and went off without me.

Just before they went off my betrothed arrived. He was disappointed that I would not be going to the party with the rest of the family. But he couldn't go against my mother, of course. I half-hoped that he would offer to stay with me and help, but he is a carpenter, not a household servant. House work is for women, after all, so of course he did not stay but went off with the rest.

And I mopped the floor and wrung out the cloth, rust-red from the soil. Mopped and wrung, mopped and wrung. The sun was set now and the stars were beginning to glimmer.

Then the angel came. It could only be an angel. This was an angel straight from Isaiah's temple-vision: glorious radiant, burning. The six wings quivered all around with such perpetual motion it was hard to perceive anything but the brightness. The whole house was lit up, brighter even than when the early sun shines through the windows – and with a light less comfortable, less kind. It spoke.

“Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you! Blessed are you among women!”

As I say, it spoke, and I heard the words, but my mind was so confused that I couldn't really understand them. All I could think about was the dazzling brightness. I remember clearly thinking that the angel was standing right in the middle of the muddiest part of the dais. I was afraid it would cause the weakened structure to collapse. How heavy are angels? I was afraid its brightness would set the house on fire. Or perhaps these weren't my real fears. At any rate, I was afraid.

I think the angel sensed my fear. It didn't speak again just then. It did something else. There I was, trembling, gasping and staring in fear, and then an incredible smell assailed me. A familiar smell – the odour of new-baked bread, strong, as though all the bread in the world had been combined to send this rarefied fragrance into my home. And with the bread came something else – overtones of unknown spices, undertones of warm grass and the wind off the sea. I can't really describe it, but the scent spoke to me more clearly than anything else could have at that moment. It spoke and said “Do not be afraid...be at peace...fear not...be still.” My terror abated. I began to breathe again, though I still could not look at the angel.

Again it spoke, using words, though this time it sang them softly, with a note of triumph in its tone.

“You have found favour with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son and will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the most High and the Lord God will give unto him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end – no end – of his kingdom there will be no end.”

The words echoed round the room as though for them too there would be no end.

I was dumbfounded. I was stunned at what I heard. Astonished at its implications. I was amazed, too, that God would act so arbitrarily. Had I nothing to say? To give? Was I just a vessel with no meaning of my own?

The scent began again, stronger now, with a strong hint of citrus peel swirling through the rest. And the message came again “Do not be afraid...be at peace.” And this time also, “Speak. You have something to say, a role to play. Voice your thought.”

Quite an invitation. I wanted to be respectful. I wanted to show my great sense of honour. And I wanted to ask about this seeming edict. Had I a choice? Was God taking over my free will? But when I found my tongue what I stammered out was “How did you know I'd be alone? It was an accident that I am here at all tonight.”

I stopped. That wasn't what I wanted to say. And it occurred to me that my accident with the water jar might have been less of an accident than it had seemed. For some reason I didn't want to hear that. Quickly I opened my mouth again. This time I would express my wonder and gratitude.

“You'll have to wait till I'm married.”

“Why?” asked the angel.

“Well, how else can I conceive?”

“With God all things are possible.”

I was silent then, silent and still. The whole house was still as I thought. The very movement of the angel's wing seemed arrested – though I still could not look directly at it – even the sounds of the birds and the breeze in the trees were hushed. For how long? Did the very world stop turning?

Think,” said the angel, “What you are asked to share.” I was thinking, but now a series of clear pictures arose in my mind.

I saw total darkness suddenly erupt into warmth and light.

I saw the beggar, Timaeus, who sits each day by the well, blind and lame – saw him running and leaping in the streets with a glorious smile on his face.

I saw a group of tents in the desert. Saw an old man with a staff in his hand. Heard him say “One like unto me will come.” Saw him turn and walk away.

I saw a crowd on a beach and a youngish man in a boat talking, talking so that all listened.

I saw an old man and a young boy climbing a hill, carrying faggots. I saw the boy laid on an altar with the knife raised to strike, and then released and a ram substituted for him.

I saw three crosses on a hillside. I saw a rich man's tomb standing open.

I knew, though I didn't understand the pictures, that I was being invited to share the story of God working in and with and through humanity. I knew that the Messiah was at hand, that God himself would come to us.

But. But. I didn't see myself or my betrothed. I didn't see a place for my household work or the daily tasks of a woman. I didn't see my place in it all.

“No.” I found myself talking to the angel quite naturally. “I am not the one. I rejoice in what is coming, but I am not the one.”

The brilliant light flashed. “No?” it queried. “So be it. The Lord bless you, my child.” And it was gone.

It was dark in the house with the fire almost out. I hastened to blow up the embers and light the lamp. Where the angel had stood the mud was dry, the dais mended.

I put away my damp cloth and laid out the beds.

My family returned. “Such a party!” exclaimed my mother. “We brought you some food. I'm sorry you missed it, but,” looking around, “You've made a wonderful job of the floor, Abigail.”

We read the story of Mary and I told you the fictional tale of Abigail. One girl who said “yes” to God without question, and another who did not. Maybe Abigail saw better than Mary some of what it would mean to be the mother of the Messiah, the mother of God made flesh. Maybe sometimes it is better not to be able to see so clearly into the future.

As Christmas comes round again, many of us, perhaps the more so as we grow older, will find that we are thinking about the things that have happened since last Christmas, or since

Christmases we remember years ago. Maybe there are things you wish you could have now were coming - good things, happy things. Maybe there are things you are glad you could not anticipate. Any life takes courage. Life lived as an acceptance of God's challenges certainly takes courage.

The message of Christmas came to Mary as a challenge and, although she could not know all that it would mean - and the prophet Simeon was later to tell her that through this son of hers, a sword would pierce her soul - although she could not know all that it would mean, Mary accepted the challenge.

When we really think about the story of the first Christmas it comes to us with challenge as well.

John Betjeman put it well at the end of his poem entitled "Christmas"

And is it true? and is it true?
The most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissueed fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant.

No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single Truth compare –
That God was Man in Palestine
And lives to-day in Bread and Wine.

We have gathered tonight to wonder at the story of God sending his Son, God, the maker of all, sending his very self to be one of us, one with us. And if it is true, it is not a story that we can just rehearse and enjoy and walk away from. It is not a story that we can allow to end in the manger. It is a story that goes on as we watch with the man that Jesus grew to become and see how he shows us God's values overturning the expectations and assumptions of human society, overturning expectations of entitlement, of self-interest with love that give and gives and never thinks of itself.

If it is true it comes to all of us with challenge - the challenge to bow before God in wonder and to rise with the determination, with his help - and he promises his help - to live in a different way, content not just with what is good, but always seeking what is best, not for ourselves, but for those among whom we live: family, neighbours, friends, in ever increasing circles. The angel told Mary that "Of his kingdom there will be no end" - in time or in extent. The challenge for us is to live as citizens of that kingdom of God. Amen.