

Sermon: St James, Cambridge

Advent 4 21 December 2014

The Reverend Geoffrey Howard

Luke 1.26-38

Now that you've given up driving, said a friend on the phone recently, *you should come up to Manchester by train. You only have to change once at Ely*. Precisely, that's just the problem, *Change at Ely*. Apart from going into Cambridge and back on the bus, which has become something of an adventure, I never travel alone these days. It's not just that I'm unsteady on my feet and going up and down stairs is an effort, the real problem is the announcements, I'm deaf. I sit in an airport lounge or stand on a railway platform and hear an unintelligible voice over the loudspeaker system, I haven't a clue what information is being so urgently conveyed and I get a little panicky: I've missed my plane, or the train is going to arrive at a different platform and I've no idea which one. I ask some fellow traveller to tell me if the announcement concerns me, but despite their kindness it always seems a little hazardous to rely on a complete stranger. I asked a charming French lady for assistance at Charles de Gaulle Airport and she insisted on taking care of me for the rest of the journey, there were moments on that flight when I feared she would be taking care of me for the rest of my life. So changing trains is not as simple as my friend

suggests, I might finish up at the opposite end of the country to that to which I'm heading. Solitary travel provokes too much anxiety.

Which doesn't mean I've escaped announcements. I go to the theatre or a concert and someone announces it's time to take my seat. You could have fooled me. I go into a supermarket and everyone else hears of an irresistible bargain to be found on a particular aisle. I miss it. A friend tells me he was in a London store when there was a bomb scare, he headed for the door like an Olympic sprinter. I would have been blown up.

Today is concerned with The Announcement - **The Annunciation**, the announcement above all others. Not a public announcement, but a private one, the announcement of a birth to the mother of a child-to-be. In Jewish history and folk lore there had been precedents. Three strangers, angels whom Abraham had entertained unawares, announced that he and Sarah would have a child in their old age. There was Hannah, so great was her desperation for a child that Eli the priest thought she was drunk when he saw her praying in the Temple, but after he had heard her story she heard his announcement that she would have the son she was pleading for. And there are the words in Isaiah which we shall once again hear this Christmas, *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.*

The Annunciation gathers into itself all the previous announcements.

Through this child all the nations of the earth would indeed be blessed; and those nations would discover him to be The Wonderful Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. The Annunciation changed the history of the world.

An announcement should be clear, a muttered or garbled announcement is worse than useless; it should be brief, just a few succinct and memorable words; and it should have a sense of urgency for most announcements are made to be acted on, even the ones which tell you which platform the train is arriving at. Such was The Annunciation. The angel's voice rang like a silver trumpet, the words were clear, unequivocal and brief: *Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women.*

And Mary responded to the angel's message: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word.* There was no rushing for the exit or another platform, no panic, no anxiety, Mary's response was a simple, unambiguous and fearless acceptance of her remarkable destiny.

I don't like large art galleries. The last time I visited the Louvre I stayed about half an hour. Partly it's the crowds, you have to stand on tiptoe to view the paintings, but apart from that their sheer number of always overwhelm me, it's like having an enormous menu thrust under your nose and being spoilt for choice. The Prado is the exception. I've been to Madrid several times, and I always go to the Prado - to see one painting, although I may see a few more whilst I'm there - Fra Angelico's Annunciation, if I could take one painting home with me it would be this. The subject fascinated him and he painted several Annunciations. I only know the one in the Prado. It is the moment of the conception of the Christ child, Mary is confronted by the angel Gabriel, a golden ray of light bearing a dove streams down on her. The blue-robed Mary and the pink-robed Gabriel dominate the scene. They are the central, eye-catching participants in the drama, but in the left-hand corner two grey, sad, stooped figures reveal, for me, the true greatness of Angelico's vision. They are our first parents, Adam and Eve, stumbling out of Eden, another angel with a flaming sword hovers over them. They are a tragic contrast to Mary

and Gabriel. Angelico has packed a whole Christina theology into this canvas, here we have Paradise lost and here we have Paradise regained.

Gabriel's announcement was an intensely private experience, for Mary a one-to-one encounter with the divine. Our great privilege is to witness that encounter and to overhear the angel's words, for as Fra Angelico so clearly perceived, these words although addressed to Mary are also intended for us, the erring sons and daughters of our first erring parents. It is in this child-to-be that we too find redemption, our own Paradise restored.

An old friend, long dead, spent every summer in Italy, to which he travelled by train. He loved to tell the story against himself of how he was once waiting for a connection at the Gare de Lyon when he got so absorbed in a book that he missed his train. Never mind, he was told, there's another one goes from the Gare de Nord in a couple of hours . He arrived there and again became so absorbed in his book that he missed that train also. He eventually arrived in Italy, but more by good luck than good management.

The saints tell us that if only we had ears to hear we would hear God announcing himself to us incessantly in a multitude of ways: St Paul heard him when he was on a murderous mission to destroy the infant Church; Augustine heard him in the voice of a child playing in a neighbouring garden – Take and read, take and read; CS Lewis on the top deck of a bus in Oxford heard him; Bunyan heard him when he was travelling through the wilderness of this world; even I heard him on April 1st 1948 in a gloomy hall in Ashton-under-Lyne, and that was the turning point of my life. God is always announcing himself, but so often we are too absorbed in our own story, we fail to hear him and the gospel train leaves us standing on the platform. Like Mary we have to stop in our tracks, become still and attentive - to listen, to attend - and, like her, be prepared to respond with, *Thy will be done.*