

Luke 1: 26-38 The Annunciation

When Bernhard kindly invited me back to preach in this lovely church, he filled me in on some of the events the parish has undertaken in the last year, including a pilgrimage to Walsingham. 2008 has also been the 150th anniversary of the appearance of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes, and in September the Archbishop of Canterbury visited the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes where he took part in an ecumenical conference on 'Mary and the Unity of the Church'. At the conference Cardinal Walter Kasper commented that such an event was a miracle in itself considering the bitter disputes and polemic Marian controversies have stimulated in the non-Catholic churches over the years. The title 'Mary and Unity of the Church' presents a challenge to many Anglicans, let alone a coming together of Orthodox, Catholic and free Protestant churches. While the Church of England is extraordinarily broad, the majority of its members would differentiate themselves from Roman Catholics on their beliefs about, and devotion to, Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Many Anglicans are suspicious of, if not strong objectors to the use of titles like 'Our Lady', 'Queen of Heaven', or 'Mother of God'. They might tolerate the 'Hail Mary' but only when it is sung cherubically in Latin at a wedding or funeral to a pretty tune by Schubert or Gounod. We can cope with 'Lady Day' as a quaint legal archaism, but we do that very English thing of using initial letters to hide anything faintly embarrassing, unfit for polite company such as the *Water Closet*, which becomes the W.C. Thus the F.H.B. term used by Anglicans for the *Blessed Virgin Mary* is the B.V.M. Our new protestant-inclined Chaplain at my school suffers from Mary-phobia and has dropped 'BVM' festivals completely from the Chapel calendar, even though they are found in the Book of Common Prayer – Cranmer's infamous crypto-papist pamphlet. For many Christians it seems Mary's role in the Gospel and the Church is that of a rather embarrassing aunt, who is only ever invited over at Christmas when she can sit quietly in the corner while the other guests are distracted, cooing over the baby.

In this morning's Gospel St Luke takes us back to the Annunciation, a reading we would have heard nine months ago in March, when it gave us a tantalising glimpse of Christmas. In his two works about the beginning of the Christian Church, St Luke starts by focusing our attention not only on the figure of Mary but on the *Holy Spirit*. When the angel comes to make his announcement to Mary, he promises that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her; and when at the beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles* the disciples gather in the upper room to await the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit, *Mary* is in the midst of them. St Luke seems

to underline connection between understanding the role of Mary and understanding the Holy Spirit.

Why might this be? St Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit is the creator of *koinonia*, the creator of communion. The Holy Spirit creates in us relationship with Jesus Christ and thus creates in us relationship with one another. As we are bound together in the Spirit we are bound to Jesus Christ: as we are bound to Jesus Christ, we discover our eternal union with God the Father, through the prayer of Christ shared with us in the Holy Spirit. And that may give us a clue to understanding the significance of Mary in St Luke's two texts. The Spirit overshadows Mary, creating in her body a relationship with Jesus. The first human relationship with Jesus Christ is a *material* one, a *maternal* one even; it is the child growing in Mary's womb. As soon as that relationship with Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, is there in the flesh of Mary, Mary goes to share that relationship as she travels to visit Elizabeth. Mary, in receiving relationship with Jesus Christ, receives the possibility of creating relationship with others in Christ to the Father through the power of the Spirit. Mary extends that reality of relationship to those around her. I believe that that is why at the beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles*, we are given that apparently casual reference to the Mother of Jesus, just to remind us that as the disciples wait for the Spirit, for the promise of the Father, Mary is among them. Her relationship with Jesus continues to be a relationship with the disciples as they wait for the gift of the Spirit.

At the Lourdes conference considering Mary and the unity of the Church, Rowan Williams said he believed that we need to think about Mary in relation to the Holy Spirit, as we do in our creeds. We need to see this in the gift of the Spirit to Mary – both at the Annunciation and as she prays among the apostles at Pentecost – as the one in whom relationship with Jesus takes its root and begins to spread. It's significant, he said, that after the story of the Annunciation we do not in any of the Gospels simply meet Mary *alone*: we meet her with Jesus' family, we meet her among the women and with the beloved disciple at the cross, we meet her in the midst of the apostolic band. But it's as if we never meet her without *communion*, without her living in communion with all those others called by the Spirit, transformed by the Spirit into friendship with Jesus Christ. This is the point. Unity is of course never an abstract reality, it is the community of persons; and therefore to think about unity in connection with Mary is to think about Mary's very specific very material relationship with Jesus, which is then shared with others.

And so let's focus just for a moment on the significance of the relationship with Jesus not being *abstract*. When God's people relate to Jesus Christ, they do not relate to an idea or an ideal, they don't even relate to a distant memory: they relate to a bodily person in physical, material history. Remember, the greatest New Testament image for the unity of Christians is the Body of Christ: because that first relationship with Jesus that we encounter in the New Testament is the deeply material physical relationship of Mary to the child she carries.

So as Mary tells us something about communion and its centrality in the communication of Christ's life, and as Mary shows us a pattern of the outpouring of the Spirit immediately creating relationship with Christ in those around, so too Mary reminds us that that relationship is deeper than mere ideas alone. From our contemplation of how Mary is portrayed to us in the New Testament, we can deduce a number of significant points for our understanding of our faith in common. Firstly, faith is never an individual matter. When the Spirit kindles the life of Christ in us it is at once a life that is shared and always to be shared: never a possession to be clung to, a talent to be buried in the ground, always a gift to *be given*.

Secondly, what unites our faith as Christians is the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Our unity is not a matter of the forms of words we can agree about. Our unity in and through the Spirit is a unity with the Jesus of actual material history, a Jesus truly born of the Virgin, truly vulnerable and human, truly walking in flesh and blood the roads of Galilee, truly and terribly suffering, truly risen from the dead in glorified bodily form. So, we are united, Mary reminds us, through *that* physical reality and no other. And when any Christian family loses sight of that anchored reality of the Incarnate Christ, then it can't have any vital unity at all. We just end up with an idea of the Church that is a great deal less than what it should be. But, if we keep our faith anchored to the Incarnate Christ, we are united in dependence on him; united in the Spirit and not by our own effort; united in relation to Jesus as material, historical and actual. If all this seems to imply a certain doctrine of the Resurrection then this is the truth. We can't have any doctrine of the Church unless we believe in the Resurrection as portrayed in the New Testament: an empty tomb, and not a dead body but a living person.

If we take the role of Mary seriously in our thinking about the unity of the Church, we are bound to consider how her model of relation with Christ in the Spirit drives us back to the conviction that we have to seek, however hard, for a unity that is really alive and visible. At

times there may be little clear sense of what that might be, let alone how we can get there, yet this must be our prayer. Christmas offers a unique opportunity to glimpse what that unity might be as our divided Churches and much of the secular world gather together in the stable gazing at this wondrous thing in Mary's arms.

Mary shows us how the Holy Spirit is mysteriously much more interested than we are in bodies and history, in Mary and the disciples, in the suffering and risen body of Christ, in the sacraments. That is how and where we encounter the Holy Spirit – not in the privacy of our own heads. We catch a glimpse how the unity of Christ's people springs to life in the human actuality of the Visitation and Pentecost: Mary, overshadowed by the Spirit, rushes to tell her cousin; Mary in the midst of the disciples waits for the promise of the Father which will break down the boundaries of a broken and divided world; Mary waiting for and acting out the new world, the new humanity which the Spirit brings into being, the incarnation and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Annunciation reminds us that all human history is there, in her womb, about to be born.