

Luke 1:26-38

24.12.17

“Yes”

There are some occasions when you are faced with the choice of saying “yes” to God – or not. There are two dramatic examples in Luke’s Gospel and in both cases much depends upon the response. The second example comes towards the end of the Gospel where Jesus is facing his death. He is in the Garden of Gethsemane in great anguish, steeling himself for his arrest and for what lies ahead, and he prays fervently, pleading with God to spare him - yet, as he adds, ‘not my will but yours be done...’ I don’t imagine that Jesus had any awareness that in that moment he was virtually quoting his mother when she was told of his impending birth, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her of these extraordinary thing that what was to take place. She, a virgin, would conceive and give birth to a child who would be called Jesus, because he would be a Saviour. And Mary’s response? ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ ‘Not my will but yours be done.’ ‘Let it be with me according to you word’ – both are ways of saying ‘yes’, yes to God in a way that completely disturbs your life, transforms your future, ensures that you are never the same again. So Mary said “yes”, and God’s great plan of salvation entered its decisive stage and events unfolded that would transform not just the world but the entire cosmos. Truly, that ‘Let it be with me according to your word’ was a decisive moment not just in time but in eternity. Mary said “yes” to God and I want to consider for a while this morning exactly what that meant, some of the deeper ramifications of that “yes”, because although we are not Mary and although far less hangs upon our response, nevertheless we too have the option of saying “yes” to God – or not.

The first point that strikes me is that Mary’s response was a “yes” to her place in the long line of God’s chosen people, her place in the history and tradition of Israel. You see, there is a danger of considering Mary apart from the long story that preceded her and apart from the people whose story that was. So, we might tell the story of the Annunciation as if an angel just showed up one day to a woman in a random place called Nazareth and told her that she was going to have a baby who would be a Saviour. It might as well have been Amsterdam. But that is to lift the story out of context. In fact the story is full of allusions to Israel’s history. So, for example, when Mary questions how all this

can possibly happen the angel replies, ‘For nothing will be impossible for God’ – and when we hear that our minds are supposed to go right back to the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament when an old woman called Sara is told by an angel that she will be the mother of a constellation of descendants and her response is to laugh and to say, ‘how can this be?’ – to which the angels replies what? Yes – ‘Is anything impossible for God?’ And Mary’s story echoes the accounts of other women in Israel’s history whose births involved divine intervention, even if not such an extraordinary way as this. So Mary’s “yes” was a yes to her place in God’s people, and we are reminded therefore that salvation comes to the world through the establishment of a nation, a community, a people with a story and a tradition. And it is so significant that the last reference to Mary that we have in the Bible comes in the Book of Acts where Jesus’ disciples are gathered together in an upper room, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them, who will transform them into the new Israel, the new people of God, the new community raised to be salt and light to the world. In other words, Mary’s “yes” was a yes to the church and to her eventual place in it. And that’s a reminder that to be a Christian is not a solo act but it means being part of a community with a distinctive story and tradition that gives it a unique identity. And saying “yes” to God is a yes to finding our own identity there in that community. And to be baptised is to be baptised into that story, that community, that identity. And that can seem like bad news because so often the church is bad news. The great Christian activist Dorothy Day used to say that the church is the cross on which Christ is crucified, and it sometimes seems like that. Yet God perseveres with it and loves it and so should we.

That brings us to the second dimension of Mary’s “yes” and while it sounds a bit dramatic, in a sense it was a “yes” to life and to all that life brings, good and bad. This is a deeper, more profound yes, not just to Jesus’ birth but to all that it will bring. Let me put it this way. One significant feature of this story is that Mary is not asked if she will bear Jesus. She is told that she will. The angel Gabriel tells her that she has found favour with God, and then, ‘you will conceive in your womb and bear a son...’ There is no negotiation here, no deals. So what would have happened if Mary had said no, or at least closed her heart to what was to happen, resisting it, resenting it? The birth would still have happened, but it would have been so different for Mary.

There is a beautiful book by the Irish writer Colm Tóibín called ‘The Testimony of Mary’ in which Tóibín imagines Mary at the end of her days, living in Ephesus and reflecting on the extraordinary events of her life. This is a weary, hardened Mary who looks back with grief and some bitterness on what has befallen her, a feisty Mary who give short-shrift to those who come to her and want her to make of her son’s life any kind of triumph or victory. Towards the end of the book there is a harrowing but moving passage where she speaks these words to some who have come to her and spoken of Christ’s death as redemption: ‘I was there’, I said. ‘I fled before it was over but if you want witnesses then I am one and I can tell you now, when you say that he redeemed the world, I will say that it was not worth it. It was not worth it.’ That seems to me to represent what Mary would have been like if she had not said “yes”, if she had never got that place when from deep in her heart she could say, ‘let it be with me according to your word.’ Events would have unfolded anyway. She would still have given birth and her son would still have been executed. But it would have been different for her. After all, so much of Mary’s life was hard. She had to cope with Jesus distancing himself from her, refusing on one occasion to even acknowledge her as his mother. And then the terrible trauma of watching her son crucified. How could she come out of that whole and intact? How could she survive? Well, I would suggest that her deep, foundational “yes” to God brought with it a profound poise and strength that prevented her from despairing of life.

Going back to what I was saying earlier about this passage carrying echoes of Israel’s past and its narratives and traditions, there is one phrase that resonated again and again in the Old Testament and which is taken up in the Gospels repeatedly and it’s the phrase ‘do not be afraid!’ And when we are told in our passage that when Gabriel appeared to her Mary was ‘much perplexed’ by what he told her it’s no surprise that his next words to her draw on those ancient cadences: ‘Do not be afraid.’ Mary’s life could have been fraught with fear, as can ours. We are so easily crippled by fear and it so poisons our world and our lives. But to say “yes” to God is to say “no” to fear. It is to say “yes” to the love that binds all things together despite our worst efforts. It’s to say ‘Amen!’ to that great declaration that ‘if God is for us, who can be against us?’ It is to say “yes” to God’s “yes” to us. And ultimately it is to say ‘yes’ to life and whatever life throws at us. It’s that “yes” to God that nerves us and steels us come what may. It won’t change what happens to us, but it will change us.

That brings me to one final point: saying “yes” to God means saying “yes” to grace. This annunciation story, after all, is about grace – about a young woman being chosen for no obvious or apparent reason, but being honoured with a vital role in God’s plan. But I suspect that having said “yes” to the angel’s announcement, Mary saw the odd angel again in her life. Such a “yes” to grace would enable her to notice things out of the corner of her eye, we might say, for that is often how grace appears: it would ‘tune’ her to God’s grace.

I don’t really know what to make of the angels in the Gospel story. Are they real? Are they heavenly beings? Are they just messengers? What the stories of angels in the Bible appear to tell us is that God surprises us in events and encounters that come unexpectedly and undeservedly. It comes in those moments when we are surprised by love, or by forgiveness, or by generosity, or when we find the strength to carry on that we did not know we had. Grace comes when in the midst of darkness a light shines – when we find that despite the cruelty of the world it has a kinder face that smiles upon us when we least expect it. In such moments we find God’s calling card - but we so easily miss it. We are much better at noticing the darkness, the cruelty, the harshness. We are better attuned to the predictable than to the unexpected, the surprise. Our eyes and our hearts need to be opened to notice.

Christmas is all about light shining in the darkness when we thought that the darkness would extinguish it. Christmas is about God, God’s Word, becoming flesh, full of grace and truth. It’s about a young woman who said “yes” to God. And it’s an invitation to us to say “yes” too. It’s an invitation to find our place and our identity in the people of God, to say “yes” to life despite what it throws at us, and to become alive and alert to the grace that surrounds and surprises us all our days. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
eternal creator become creature,
eternal word become flesh,
eternal Spirit birthing all creation,
we praise and bless your holy name.

We worship you who
said 'yes' to creating all things in heaven and on earth,
and we worship you who in Jesus Christ
has said 'yes' to coming into the world you love,
laying aside your glory;
and we praise you for Mary, the mother of God,
who said 'yes' to becoming the mother of Jesus
and giving birth to our Lord and Saviour,
despite the risk and the shame.

We praise you for your – and for Mary's – faithfulness.

O God forgive us for times when we say 'yes'
to things we should say 'no' to...

and 'no' to things we should say 'yes' to.

Forgive us for when we compromise
and take the easy way out, resisting your call
because of its demands.

Forgive us we pray and make us like Mary
who did what was not easy but who submitted to your will.

Assure us we pray for your forgiveness and grace
And give us Mary's willingness to obey and to serve.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, born of Mary
and our Lord and Saviour. Amen.