

Sunday 21 December 2008 : The Fourth Sunday of Advent

No hovering angel

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16; Luke 1:26-38

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

Over in Trafalgar Square stands a crib, commissioned by St. Martin's, and designed by the Japanese artist Tomoaki Suzuki. It's the third year that particular crib has been there, and in that time, the various figures representing the characters in the story have become familiar. As I've helped to carry them back and forth, to wrap them and store them and to unwrap them again the following year, I've begun to get used to their character – the demure figure of Mary kneeling before her son; Joseph gazing as a father besotted with the tiny child; the shepherd standing solid and stoical, yet drawn inexorably into this amazing scene; the kings bringing gifts, pointing heavenward, bringing a detached sense of status and cosmic significance to the homely scene. Each of them speaks to me in some way of the mystery wrapped in bands of cloth that lies before them in the manger.

The one figure who doesn't work for me is the angel. The ethereal, blond and, at the risk of betraying those of my own gender, all-too-feminine figure hovering over the scene doesn't for me catch the very essence of what an angel is all about – the sense of God breaking through and turning our world upside down.

Angels in the Bible, and angels in the mystical writings of Judaism, Islam, and the apocryphal writings of Christianity are a powerful and disturbing bunch. There's little sign of ethereal hovering in for example this passage from the Second Book of Enoch:

*Their faces were like the shining sun;
Their eyes were like burning lamps;
From their mouths fire was coming forth;
Their clothing was various singing;
Their wings were more glistening than gold;
Their hands were whiter than snow.*

The heavenly host is depicted in scripture, not as tinsel-decked cherubs but as the front line troops of the struggle between good and evil, as picked up in the hymn we'll sing later:

*Rank on rank the host of heaven,
Spreads its vanguard on the way,
As the Light of light descendeth
From the realms endless day,
That the powers of hell may vanish
As the darkness clears away.*

The names of the archangels, the chief among this heavenly host, all speak of this power, this breaking in of God – El the name of God in Hebrew. So Michael, from Micha-el, "who is like God?" depicted in the books of Daniel and Revelation as leading the fight against the deceiver, the devil; Rapha-el, "the healing of God", depicted as the guide and guardian of Tobias in the book of Tobit; and Uri-el, "the fire of God", sometimes called Phanu-el, "the

Presence of God”, known as the one with whom Jacob wrestled in that place which he came to see God face to face.

And most familiar of all is Gabri-el, “the mighty one of God”. Gabriel it is who is so often the mouthpiece of God – the one who speaks the message of God. There’s a wonderful parallel here between the traditions of Christianity and Islam. For Moslems, Gabri-el (Jibril) is the one who reveals the words of the Koran to Muhammad. In Christianity, Gabriel is best known in the stories of Advent and Christmas, where it’s he who announces the breaking in of God in the most unexpected ways.

In the first chapter of Luke, he bursts into the sanctuary of the Temple, where the priest Zechariah is offering incense at the altar, to announce that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, an elderly couple resigned to being childless, were to be the parents of John the Baptist, the one who was to prepare the way for the coming of the long awaited Messiah.

Just as Zechariah and Elizabeth are getting used to the shock of this, Gabriel creates more upheaval, breaking into the domesticity of an ordinary Jewish house, to announce that the Messiah is to find a home in the womb of Mary, a young unmarried woman.

Ethereal hovering, and basic good manners don’t seem to be high up on Gabriel’s skill set. But that may be because he has more important things on his mind. What he has to say to both Zechariah and Mary, is the news of God’s breaking into our world; of God coming into the cosy and familiar and confounding our expectations. In puzzlement and fear, Mary asks “how can this be?”. Gabriel’s answer makes clear that this is no ordinary conception, and no ordinary birth:

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

God is about to erupt into the world in the child of Bethlehem, in the Word made flesh in the womb of Mary. The creator of the universe creates space in our world for God himself to dwell with mortals.

And perhaps part of our wish to leave the angels, to leave Gabriel, the mighty one of God, hovering passively over the Christmas scene, is that we feel safer with a God confined to a space we can understand.

Perhaps King David was thinking along similar lines, nearly a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, when he tried to confine God to a building of cedar wood. On paper, David’s idea seemed perfectly reasonable. His position as King was at last secure and established and his dwelling place reflected his power and his glory - the “*the King was settled in his house and the Lord had given him rest from his enemies*” – as the second book of Samuel puts it. And he wasn’t just another successful King – he was the Lord’s anointed. So it seemed appropriate that the God who had established him David, should also have his power and his glory reflected in a fine dwelling. God been stuck in the tent that had carried the Ark of the Covenant for too long. Now was the time for something much more permanent. God’s response to David is to recount the dynamic acts of redemption that he had worked amongst his people Israel - the people that he led out and redeemed from slavery in Egypt. This God was one who was active among his people. The words that the Lord speaks through the mouth of Nathan the prophet, reflect the nature of a God for who cannot be confined by human structures – whether of stone, or thought, or doctrine.

God told David that the dwelling place he wanted was a people dedicated to him, a people faithful to the covenant with the Lord. Amongst such a faithful people, God's dwelling place in hearts and minds would be established as a dynamic, active Kingdom, full of the hope of transformation, full of the possibility of God breaking in through the unexpected and unlikely. Advent begins with the cosmic images of judgement and redemption, of earth shaking and the heavens being torn open. Today on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we hear the story of the Annunciation where the creator God, who could not be confined by even the finest building David could offer, bursts into world by God's own self-limiting in the flesh and blood of the womb of Mary. In that moment in Nazareth, as Gabriel announces the breaking of the power of the most High, the heavens are torn open and infinity of God touches the limitations of human space and time.

How do we respond to such a God ; to the mighty ones who announce God's coming today; to this God who bursts into the places where we least expect God to be? What sort of space do we create ourselves to receive such a God?

Well, for me, the only valid response is to go back to the crib in the Square and to my favourite amongst the characters there. That's the donkey, the humble beast of burden. The donkey stands, head bowed and turning away from the tiny child, as if almost unable to comprehend or to bear the wonder of this moment – this breaking into this space of his Creator, of our Creator, the Creator of all time and all space.

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded,
For with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.*