

Luke 1.26-38; 2 Samuel 7.1-11,16; Romans 16.25-end.
4th Sunday of Advent (4th of month)
St. Andrew's, Totteridge, 8 & 10 a.m.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer (Ps 19:14)

Today's readings, all three of them, are about how God moves in mysterious ways and that all his ideas exceed our wildest dreams. We hear how the angel Gabriel tells Mary she has found favour with God, and that she will be the vessel for His very human Son, to be named Jesus (meaning 'he who saves'). This Son will be heir to the throne of David and his reign will never end. Five Sundays ago, we celebrated this particular belief in the festival of Christ the King.

Mary is baffled; she's never been with a man but obviously knows enough to realise how these things usually come about. She doesn't understand how this will be, until Gabriel takes some time and trouble to explain. The power of the Holy Spirit is a divine power, a power intimately involved in the creation of everything. This will be no problem for a being who has already wielded that power in making fertile Mary's barren older relative Elizabeth, now pregnant with the child who will become the herald of the Christ, John the Baptist, **'For nothing will be impossible with God.'**

I'm not going to draw you into a debate about the truth of the virgin birth, or indeed any of Jesus' so-called miracles including his own resurrection. For what it's worth, I believe in them all, but then I'm a great believer in this fundamental idea that **'nothing will be impossible with God.'** and I celebrate such

things by recalling a phrase of Winston Churchill's when describing Russian intentions at the beginning of WWII, **'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.'** If we look back to the other activities of the angel Gabriel, for instance, what we see is a repeated sequence of aspirations falling short of what God actually does.

Look at what we heard in 2 Samuel for instance. After a long-drawn-out period of war, peace is finally established in the reign of the new King David, and the warrior-monarch turns his mind to the idea of quite literally building a permanent house for the Ark of the Covenant, now brought within the walls of Jerusalem to great rejoicing. It is often easier to start a project than to wait for God to lead, and God had much greater ideas than David could ever imagine.

David could only conceive of the need for a physical house for God and didn't understand that what God had in mind for David was that he would be the head of a great dynasty, beginning with Solomon and leading ultimately to the birth of the Son of God to one who, by marriage, would become a member of the same dynastic house, the Virgin Mary. God intervened to deflect David from his good idea in order to open the way for God's greater one.

These episodes also remind me of one Abraham, who, generations before and similarly visited by the Holy Spirit in Genesis 18, would become the **'ancestor of a multitude of nations'**, the father of all who follow the Abrahamic faiths. Centuries later, and again in a similar way, St. Peter proposes building dwellings to contain the experience of the Transfiguration, where Jesus has turned a dazzling white on

the mountaintop (Mark 9.5-7), but God will not be domesticated by us, however sincere our intentions. As Solomon later prayed at the dedication of his Temple (1Kings 8.1-13), even the highest heaven cannot contain God. The wonder is, and it is wonderful, is that this uncontainable God had begun to work in David's life and continues to do so in ours (R.f. S., '17B, p.39, R. Brown).

We have a weakness in the English language in that we don't distinguish between the 'knowing' of having an experience, and the 'knowing' of being able to understand something - hence for instance the potential for confusion in the prayer from Ephesians that goes how we might '[know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge](#)' (Eph. 3.19 - R.f.S., p.40, S. R. Jones).

God's ways are not our ways, nor are his thoughts our thoughts (Isa. 55.8). We see the truth of this all the time, but particularly in scripture when we consider the people God calls to serve him in specific ways. From David, son of Jesse, to Saul, the persecutor of Christians who would become St. Paul (Acts 9), God's choice of those he calls to serve very often challenges our 'Oh-so-human' judgement.

Mary was a young girl betrothed to a carpenter in an insignificant backwater of the Roman Empire. Nothing could have prepared her for what Gabriel told her would happen. Especially chosen by God - 'favoured' is the word - she shares none of the kind of features we might associate with a human notion of 'favour' - health, wealth, schooling or comfort. If we are to open ourselves up to receive God's blessings, we too, like Mary, need to step out in trust. Like her, we too are

challenged to 'Go out into the darkness and put [our] hand into the Hand of God' (Minnie L. Haskins, *The Gate of the Year*, cited by Barbara Mosse, R.f.S., '17B, p.41)

St. Paul refers to a '[revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages](#)' (Rom.16.25). Christmas is a good time, perhaps the best, given all the attendant mysteries of the nativity stories, to remind ourselves that at least part of our celebration must be to stop overthinking, and allow ourselves to be transported in the sheer wonder, joy and adoration of the incarnation, the love of God in Christ that is to be made manifest.

Spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

2 Samuel 7.1-11,16 God's Covenant with David

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Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.' ³Nathan said to the king, 'Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.'

⁴But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a

tabernacle. ⁷Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?' ⁸Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. ¹⁶Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

Romans 16.25-end.

Final Doxology

25 Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.

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