



Worship and Christmas

An address for the Cosmic Mass on Advent Sunday ●
2nd December 2007 ● Rev Heather

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And 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 called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-38

At the beginning of Advent, we look forward with longing and anticipation to the fresh inflow of the light of Christ that Christmas brings to us and to our world. Through the next weeks, if we use this time of Advent well, we will be preparing ourselves to receive that light more fully than ever before. We will become more conscious of the spiritual worlds interpenetrating this physical world. "Every Christmas when we celebrate the coming of the Christ into the world, the veil between the visible and invisible becomes more transparent," Rev Mario said. Our insight into the mystery of the Word becoming flesh will be deepened as we enter into the events surrounding the descent of Christ to earth.

In our community, we will mark the four Sundays of Advent in a number of ways. Today, as you came into the foyer, you would have noticed four candles on the table, but only the first one alight. Lighting another candle each Sunday in Advent is a traditional way of marking the passing of these weeks and building our anticipation of the pouring out of the light of Christ into the world at the Christmas season.

From Hall to Chapel

We will also watch the Christmas story unfold before us as a new panel, created by one of our Centre artists, is added each week to the front of the chapel.

I know this is not a chapel in the traditional sense, in that it is not a space dedicated solely to worship, but it is quite remarkable that a community hall is transformed into a chapel when together we consciously lift up our hearts to experience the presence of God within us.

The word chapel comes from the Latin word for cloak, and the reason for this connection has to do with St Martin de Tours. Martin is the saint of whom it is said to have cut his military cloak in half to give part to a beggar. What was left of the cloak covered his shoulders like a small cape or *capella*. The beggar, it is said, was Christ in disguise, and as a result of this experience Martin became a monk. The Frankish kings later came into possession of Martin's cape and they kept this holy relic with them when they went into battle. The place where the cape was kept was called the *capella*. The priests who said Mass there were known as *capellani*, or what we would call chaplains. Chapels were often attached to cathedrals or institutions or great houses, but sometimes were separate buildings.

This reminded me of the building of the great cathedral of Chartres. It was the custom to place a holy relic at the heart of a new cathedral. The ruler of the Frankish kingdom, of which Chartres was a part, was Charles the Bald. He had an extensive collection of holy relics, many of them coming to him from his grandfather Charlemagne. From these, he chose the veil that Mary was said to have worn at the birth of Jesus. This was a particularly significant choice since there is a long tradition that Chartres, going back before the time of Christ, was a place where the eternal feminine was honoured. When the cathedral was built it was a hymn in glass and stone to the divine feminine, which we sometimes name as Mary or Sophia. At its heart was the veil of Mary, symbol of her purity of soul and of her high spiritual attainment.

We do not have a literal cloak or veil to guard, but we could see that, in our meeting together during Advent, we are symbolically guarding Mary's mantle, just as the keepers of the first place named a chapel guarded St Martin's cloak. We do this by treasuring and honouring the feminine in us and by seeking to become vessels through whom Christ can enter more fully into this world.

The Thread of Worship

There is a thread running through the Christmas stories in the Gospels that interweaves with the one that has been running through this year for us in the Centre, and that is the thread of worshipping in spirit and in truth. Mary embodies such worship, and her life demonstrates aspects of true spiritual worship that we can seek to bring into reality within us.

Surrender to the will of God

In the story of the Annunciation, which Nicola read to us, Mary's response to the news the heavenly messenger brought was, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

In artistic representations of this moment, Mary is often portrayed in an attitude of worship, bowing before Archangel Gabriel in recognition of his role as the messenger of God and of the momentous message he has brought to her. That act of worship contains wonder, awe and, above all, surrender to the will of God. As one writer said, "Mary did not pray as so many of us do, 'Your will be *changed*', but rather, 'Your will be *done*'."

To worship truly is to surrender ourselves to the will of God above every other ambition or desire or human plan. It is to set ourselves apart for a divine purpose. In the quote on the back of the songsheet, Mario says that Mary surrendered "not as a slave without will or mind, but as a full human being who could now assist in the creation of something great and beautiful". Writing to the Galatians, Paul speaks of that creation as the forming of Christ in us. It was for this that Mary surrendered – to co-operate totally with the plan of the gods. She willingly accepted all that that would mean.

We have had - and still have – grandmothers-to-be waiting for the arrival of grandchildren. Last Sunday night we saw Ellise, like Mary on the way to Bethlehem, “great with child”. She said, “It has been an interesting journey; there have been ups and downs.” Worshipping in spirit and truth, surrendering to the will of God, means accepting the highs and lows in life, the joys and pains, knowing that these are necessary for Christ to be formed in our souls.

Praise

And now let's take up the story again from where Nicola finished reading.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.” And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Luke 1:46-56

After the visitation by Archangel Gabriel, Mary went away into the hill country of Judea to the home of her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. The hill country represents an elevation of consciousness which Mary and Elizabeth shared, and they were in the area of Palestine known as Judea, which means praise. So higher consciousness is associated here with an outpouring of praise.

At their meeting, recognition flamed between the souls of the mothers and the souls of the babes, which led to that beautiful song of Mary's which we call the Magnificat.

There are other moments in the nativity stories in the Gospels where praise wells up from the soul: Zechariah praises God at the birth of his son John, the angels in the skies over Bethlehem sing “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased”, the shepherds return from Bethlehem praising and glorifying God, the wise men bow down before the child in worship as they offer him their gifts.

If we worship in spirit and truth, praise will flow out of us and deep thanksgiving for the life that springs up within when we acknowledge Christ in us.

Making the Lord great within us

Mary's song, the Magnificat, begins with the words “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.”

“My soul makes the Lord great”; that is one meaning of magnify - to enlarge or to make great. That seems rather an arrogant statement, to think that we could in any way add to the greatness of a God who is all-knowing, all-powerful and present everywhere.

Yet this is exactly what happens when we worship. We magnify our Lord. We make him great within us; we enlarge the area of our souls in which Christ is able to work. Each time we worship – and that is not simply when we meet together here or in our personal devotional times, it is whenever we acknowledge his “worth-ship” – we make Christ greater within us. Whenever we nurture the life of Christ in us, whenever we choose a Christed thought or action over other possibilities, we worship in spirit and truth, and his presence is enlarged within us. Our souls magnify him.

In the New Year meditation, we were asked what kind of environment we are providing for the spirit that dwells within our bodies - our physical, etheric and astral bodies. The questions asked of us was, “How will you honour and value the spirit of Christ within you and around you?” Today, and all of Advent, is an opportunity to reflect on how we have done this in the past year, how we are doing it now and how we may do this more fully during Advent so that we can say, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Contemplation and meditation

While the approach of Christmas on the outer level is marked by noise and extravagance and materialism and busyness, on the inner level it is marked by stillness, by meditation and contemplation, by silent waiting and joyful hope.

In Luke we read that Mary “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.” She guarded them in the deep places of her soul. That is a picture of worship.

In Fra Angelico’s Annunciation which is painted on the wall of a monk’s cell in San Marco monastery, and a print of which is on the usher’s table in the foyer, the angel Gabriel and Mary are the focus of the scene. But standing at the side is a monk contemplating the scene. He is taking a long and loving look at it. When we do this - that is, take a long and loving look at these events – something develops within us and that is an inner perception and an identification with what is taking place. As we say in Bible metaphysics, the story is about us; it takes place in us.

Mario wrote his Meditations for Advent book for this purpose. Year by year, we read the biblical passages, we light our candles and meditate on the coming of the light. We ponder these things in our hearts. And year by year, the light shines more brightly within us, we surrender a little more of our egotistical natures so that Christ may be enlarged in our souls, we are stirred to give thanks for the grace that has come to us through him.

Conclusion

Mary became a temple for the Christ through her willing acceptance of this divine purpose. Through her we come to know something of how we too can be temples in which he dwells, how we can worship in spirit and in truth the Word which becomes flesh in us.

So shall it be.

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