Sermon on Advent 4 2018

This morning’s reflection is a short one for two reasons, the wonderful children’s pageant which we just witnessed and the fact that this is really Pt I or a two-part sermon; Pt II is tomorrow night.

The story of the Annunciation which we celebrate today is the necessary introduction to the birth story itself; this not simply because of the obvious, the birds and the bees, if you will, but because without it we’re actually left with a one-sided understanding of Christmas; we’re left with the amazing, astounding act of God in sending the Son;

but without this story we wouldn’t have an icon of what it means to respond, to welcome, to give assent.

That last statement is meant as irony because the story of the Anunciation is often understood, probably under influence of its root meaning as “the Announcement” as something that God has determined to do and that *will* happen.

The Divine Will is that Mary will become pregnant with the Son of God; Gabriel please go tell Mary she’s about to get pregnant; of course, be nice to her, tell her that it’s because she’s special and all, but make sure that she gets the message: this is what is happening.

The verb tenses in the story seem to lead us in this direction, “You *will* conceive in your womb and bear a son,” “you *will* name him Jesus,” “The Holy Spirit *will* come upon you, and the power of the Most High *will* overshadow you.”

In the main, this has been the Protestant understanding of the Annunciation. In reaction to the medieval Catholic understanding which we’ll get to in a second, the Protestants, especially Calvinists, whose theological understanding came to dominate in North America, argued that God’s will and sovereignty could not be defied or stymied.

What you have in effect is a divine fiat, a divine: “this is the way it will be.” The Good News of the Gospel becomes, on this view, God’s unshakeable commitment to send the Son and save us from our sins.

Mary may be favoured but she’s simply a vessel, an incidental teenager, some*thing* necessary for a human baby to be born. She doesn’t even exercise the normal agency of sex with a man in order to get pregnant; she’s simply a container.

Now, if you’re a woman growing up in the 21st century in a climate of growing equality, in a time when the voice of women is gaining strength this traditional Protestant view sounds, just to be explicit, so invasive, so much like a divine #metoo moment.

“Let me tell you how special you are and then I’ll impregnate you; put your life at risk; you’re afraid? don’t worry, it’s for the best.”

Thankfully such a reading which may strike those of us most concerned that these stories find a home in contemporary culture is not actually what the story says.

If you were listening you’ll have noted those places where Mary is not passive; she’s dialoging with the angel because she’s afraid, because it doesn’t make sense that she’ll get pregnant outside of a sexual relationship

And you’ll have noted that incredibly important last sentence where Mary says, “Here I am, your servant, let it be done to me according to your word.”

Eugene Peterson translates it “Yes, I see it all now; I’m the Lord’s maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say.”

What the Great tradition saw very clearly and powerfully was the powerful agency exercised by Mary in this scene. This was a teenage girl saying “yes” to God with her total being.

Accolades abounded; in 430 at the Council of Ephesus Mary was pronounced Theotokos, Mother of God and from that came the belief that Mary was without sin, that when she went to heaven she was named Queen of Heaven.

This translated, in Catholic theology, into a woman who never sinned, never had sex (ever Virgin – I wonder what Joseph had to say about that?), and generally gave the Christian Church a vision of female piety that was all about being submissive and chaste, think nuns.

And so, even this Great Tradition version before the Reformation version can, from the perspective of our culture, is twisted; it seems to many like a different form of assault.

But the scriptural story gets the balance right. God loves us so much that God has unshakeably determined to be among us; to make a way for all of us in our sin and confusion;

But, equally, God will never act without our “yes” because that’s Love’s goal; that’s the whole point; God comes to Mary, God’s come to us, to make room for our “total yes!”

There is a divine fiat in the text but it is the fiat mihi, the latin for “let it be to me.” This isn’t a divine #metoo but a divine-human synergy that is #tome.

In God’s love there is a persuasive not a coercive power; God’s love comes towards us so that God’s love can live in us and be born through us. That is the dignity and the calling which this story reveals.