

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women."

A story is told of a priest once preaching on this text. He talked about God's choice of Mary, and how God did everything necessary to prepare her for her rôle as mother of Jesus. He told how God had filled her with grace and about her special dignity. A disgruntled parishioner took him to task afterwards, and said, "That sounded Roman Catholic to me". The preacher answered quietly, "It sounded like the Gospel according to St Luke to me".

Despite the popularity of Christmas, it is the Annunciation on 25 March rather than 25 December, that is the Church's principal celebration of the Incarnation. Then God invited Mary's cooperation in his great plan to crown creation by clothing his eternal Word in flesh. Then, Mary gave her "Yes" to God. From then onwards the way was clear for "God to be in Christ reconciling the world to himself." If then there is a place in the Holy Land associated above all with the Incarnation of the Word of God, it is not Bethlehem, but Nazareth. And it is to England's Nazareth we go when we go on pilgrimage to Walsingham.

So we could say that the whole of the gospel is wrapped up in the annunciation. It tells us about God's plans for us all and about our ability and duty to cooperate with God. God not only created the world but he wanted to human beings to share his enjoyment in his creation. Despite our hardheartedness, our stupidity and often downright

wickedness he still wants to save us and even more than that he wants to share our life so that we can share his.

Being a Christian is not about slavish and abject obedience to a remote idol, but about living and loving cooperation with God who has made us in his own image.

At the creation, God saw all that he had made, and said that it was very good. Now, in the in the fullness of time God wanted to give a final affirmation to his creation. He determined to share the human nature he had made, and did not simply zoom into our world like an alien from outer space, but chose a very humble country girl from a remote corner of the Roman Empire to be the mother of his Son. Even more than that, he did not force the issue but invited her cooperation and awaited her response. I suppose we could even talk about God taking a risk. What if Mary had said "No"?

Well, speculation on such things is nonsense because she didn't say "No", but gave her wondering and wonderful *fiat*: "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, Let it be to me according to thy will".

But Mary's "Yes" didn't come out of the blue. As a human being, she had herself been conceived, born, nurtured, raised in a family, with particular influences around her. And again, as a human being, she had been given the wonderful free gift of God to enable her to be what God wanted her to be and to do what God wanted her to do.

Note that I said, "as a human being". Because what was true of Mary is true of all of us. God has a plan for each and every one, and he doesn't leave it to chance whether we shall fulfil it or not. He gives us the grace we need and then lovingly, patiently invites us to cooperate with his grace. Not a matter of chance, but a matter of whether we will work with and for God or go our own selfish way.

So when the angel came to Mary, he didn't come to a blank sheet or a lottery, but to someone who was already able to say "Yes" - if she would.

I hope you see how relevant all this is for our own lives, and very particularly for today's celebration. We are not called to be the Mother of God; but we are all called to bear Christ to the world around us through every aspect of our lives. And it will not do for us to say "We can't", because God does not ask us to do the impossible.

Yes, of course I know that in all sorts of ways, God's grace gets overlaid in our lives - obscured because of other priorities, distorted because of our sinful habits, sometimes almost extinguished, but never completely.

So, every day, every moment is an Annunciation to us.

There is an important postscript.

I have been speaking as if the Annunciation was simply the end point of all that had gone before and as if the relevance of this to us and to God and to the members of the parishes we come from is simply how ready and willing we/you are to say "Yes" to God.

But of course the Annunciation is a beginning and not an end. The end is the eventual victory of God when he raises Mary as he wants to raise us all to the glory of heaven.

Between our "Yes" and our heavenly home lie all the ups and downs, the highways and byways of our life on earth. We can only dimly begin to imagine what Mary's joys and sorrows were as she accompanied Jesus right up to the point when the prophecy was fulfilled and "a sword pierced her heart" as she stood at the foot of his cross. But we do know that her "Yes" was not the easy fleeting word of a moment, but a lifelong acceptance of what God wanted.

That is the most important thing for us too.

When God invites our cooperation, he doesn't just want the service of our lips, but the willing offering of our lives, to be the living, breathing, willing agents of his love in the world. God wants nothing less than for the whole of our lives to be physical embodiments of his plans for the whole world. He wants to know whether we will live by what we say.