

SERMON - 14/03/21
(ST JAMES' EVENSONG SERVICE)

Texts: Isaiah 7:10-14
Luke 1:28-38

Focus of text: Da Vinci's Annunciation
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May the word of God be spoken and heard. Amen.

One of the cultural and spiritual highpoints of my life was visiting the Uffizi Gallery in Florence when I was 25, and seeing this painting on the gallery wall.

I had seen the picture before in reproductions but this was the first time that I had seen the actual painting.

It had such a powerful spiritual and emotional effect on me.

It brought me to tears.

It was like this original painting was alive with soul and beauty and spiritual power.

That was the beginning of my theory that a reproduction of an original masterpiece doesn't give you a true sense of the original painting itself.

It only gives you the sense of the subject of the original painting, not a sense of the painting itself.

So when I proposed to Derek that this year for Evensong we look at art that connects with themes from the Bible, I thought that I would speak about this painting, and its depiction of the Annunciation.

It was a way, I guess, of honouring the gift God gave me of a profound spiritual experience on seeing this masterwork.

But I also want to say that my purpose in talking about this is not simply art appreciation or art history.

I want to talk about the way that Leonardo approached this painting and what he highlights through his depiction that speaks to us of the Annunciation and its significance in Mary's life and human life.

This painting is the earliest painting that is recognised as being by Leonardo.

It was painted when he was in his early 20s - imagine that! - and working in the workshop of Andrea del Verocchio - a famous sculptor and painter of Florence during the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century.

There are questions about how much of it was Leonardo's own work, and how much of it was done by others.

But there is no scholarly consensus about the painting, apart from the fact that this is a real Leonardo - the earliest masterwork of his that we have.

I want to talk about three main aspects of the painting that give us insight into the joyful mystery of the Annunciation.

But first I want to talk about the historical and cultural background to the painting.

The Annunciation had been a much loved subject of artists throughout the history of painting in Western Europe.

There were established ways of presenting it, with the angel Gabriel on the left and Mary on the right.

Mary is honoured by the angel and Mary expresses shock at the angel's visitation, as we see here.

The tradition was for the angel to carry a lily or for there to be a vase of flowers with a lily, as that was a symbol of purity and virginity.

All these elements we can see in Leonardo's version.

Also, typically Mary is depicted in an enclosed space, again symbolising her virginity.

In Northern Europe, the space was typically a room or a church, in Italy the space was often a terrace or enclosed garden.

I will comment later on the significance of the landscape we see in Leonardo's Annunciation, but here I will just note that while Mary is on a terrace, the broader landscape is one of the variations that Leonardo brings to the typical presentation of this theme.

Here he is putting his own stamp on the tradition, and is doing that, I believe for a theological, as well as an artistic reason.

There is another really interesting feature about this painting.

The way it is painted is not quite true to proper perspective.

Some people have thought that this was a result of Leonardo's inexperience, but actually perspective would have been one of the things he carefully studied.

There are numerous examples of a concern with perspective in his notebooks.

And I find it highly unlikely that a painter of this genius would be unaware of basic technical details, even in his early twenties.

Others have argued that the painting has this perspective because it was originally intended to be viewed largely from the right and below.

I find this a much more persuasive explanation of the odd perspective.

All of the perspective problems in the painting are rectified if it is viewed from its right hand side and below the painting.

Because of this, scholars have suggested that it was intended not to be placed front and centre - for instance, above the altar in a church or chapel.

They have suggested that it was intentionally created for a position on the right hand side of the sanctuary.

Those who were worshipping in the church or who came forward to receive communion would see the painting from its right hand side and from below.

If that was the case, then looking from the right, the first person you meet in the painting is the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Of course, she is painted in an Italianate setting, on a terrazzo, which would be typical of a Florentine palace.

To our eyes, the elaborate clothing and setting may seem strange, but in earlier times a noble setting was a way of expressing the nobility of the subject, and in this painting a way of honouring Mary.

Mary is clearly a young woman in this painting, but she is not a slip of a girl.

There is a monumental quality - a greatness about her, which is heightened by the depiction of her garments.

She has been studying, presumably the Scriptures, as one who is eager to know God's word and eager to do it.

We will all benefit from that eagerness, that willingness, which is expressed in her response to the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

This willingness finds its fullest expression in the birth of Jesus, and in her faithful nurturing and following of her Son, our Saviour.

Mary is our entry to the painting, the first and most important subject, but almost at the same time as we see her, we meet the angel Gabriel.

Like Mary, he is solid and a very real presence in the painting.

There is nothing wafty or insubstantial about him.

But the thing that struck me so powerfully when I saw him was his downcast eyes.

He is so much in awe of Mary that he dare not even look her in the face.

This archangel, this Lord of the heavenly realm, bends his knee to Mary and averts his gaze out of reverence for her.

This was such a surprise to me because I have always thought of Mary as ordinary, like us - human.

But this painting expresses in the angel's deference towards Mary the greatness of her role and of her person.

The role of Mother of God can't be separated from the person Mary who was the Mother of Jesus.

She is a hero of our faith - a pillar of our faith.

Her willingness to be the mother of the Lord gives her the most intimate union with him as she will become pregnant with him, and give birth to him, and suckle and nurture him.

It makes her an essential participant in God's plan for salvation and redemption!

And so the angel is in awe of this human person.

In fact, his deference to Mary even reminds me of the passage from Hebrews where we are told that when we reign with Christ in eternity we will rule angels.

My perspective has always been that angels are amazing. 'Wouldn't it be astounding to see into the spiritual world enough to recognise an angel in our midst?' I've thought. This angel is in awe of Mary, and expresses in his posture the privilege of encountering her human openness to God.

The lily in his left hand symbolises both Mary's purity and the city of Florence, whose emblem was a lily.

It's a personal statement to Mary.

Here you are honoured Mary - in our town, in our lives.

He raises his right hand to her, as if to say, "Greetings, favoured one, the Lord is with you."

And the slight sense of withdrawal in the posture of her body, and the position of her left hand, which seems to express some shock and surprise, holds this moment in tension.

This depicts the words of the passage, "But she was much perplexed by his greeting and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

It's an electric moment between the two beings, an intimate moment that will lead to the salvation of the world.

And this brings us to what seems to be quite a unique contribution of Leonardo's imagination to this scene. Instead of our eyesight being limited to a room or a walled garden, Leonardo has given us a long perspective into the rest of the world - distant water and ships and a vast mountain.

This sort of imaginary landscape is depicted in other paintings by Leonardo, but here it does two things. First it heightens the tension between Mary and the angel. If you think of each of the two characters in the foreground and the vanishing point between them in the vast distance - just imagine that these three points were connected with a rubber band.

The further you pull out the vanishing point the more tension exists on the other two points, and the more they are drawn in together.

This is one effect of the distant vanishing point - it heightens the tension between Mary and the Angel.

It heightens the significance of this moment and of the decision that will be made by Mary to give hospitality to God within her womb.

And it also does a second thing.

It reminds us that this intimate moment between Mary and the angel has significance for the whole world.

It's apparently very rare for Leonardo to put signs of humanity in his imaginary landscapes.

But here there are sailing ships as signs of humanity. Humans are present in the scene.

The significance of this seems to be that there is a vital connection between what is happening between Mary and the angel, and the rest of the world.

What is happening in that walled garden affects the whole of the physical world, the things of the past, the present and the future.

And it affects the world of spiritual beings as well because the incarnation binds all things together - things on earth and things in heaven, things in time and things beyond time.

One moment of God's will and human assent allowed this to happen.

And so today, a few days before the Feast of the Annunciation, we give praise to God and to the Blessed Virgin Mary for the gift of our Saviour, through whom we are drawn into the life of God. Amen.