

ADVENT 4 YEAR B

There is a legend that Mary was not the first young woman to whom the Angel Gabriel appeared. But she was the first one to say yes.

The Bible tells us nothing about the childhood of the Virgin Mary/Mother of God. Tradition tells of her parents, Anna and Joachim's, distress at their childlessness and her own miraculous conception. Echoing the Old Testament story of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, Mary was placed in the care of the Temple at the age of 3.

The character of Mary is so overladen with centuries of projections of ideas about universal womanhood that it's hard to know what to think about her/how to approach her – how to pray with her.

She is depicted most memorably as the agonising mother at the foot of the cross/the pieta cradling the body of her crucified son and as the innocent, obedient young woman cradling the baby in the manger.

The miraculous story of the Annunciation was a popular subject for 15th century Italian painters. Angels wings and ornamental gardens provided opportunities for artists to show off their technical skills in all the intricate details and rich colouring.

The Florentine monk, Fra Angelico, is famous for the devotional wall paintings he made in the cells for his brothers at the monastery of San Marco. The Annunciation was painted on the wall of the staircase leading to the dormitories.

My father gave a framed print of this painting to his first grandson, whose middle name is Gabriel, as a christening present. It has hung in our home for 33 years – and will be one of the few pictures we have room to hang in our cottage in Wales.

Fra Angelico's Annunciation has hung in my study at St Peter's Vicarage by the door to the garden for 18 years. I see it every day but I haven't looked at it for a long time – until a few days ago pondering the gospel for this Sunday.

Mostly I see the space around Mary, the Italian hillside garden, the stillness. I'd never noticed the window and the little doorway leading to a darkened inner room, centrally placed between Mary and the Angel.

In the quiet, dark hours I find myself drawn to remembering such still places. I find it consoling and strengthening to imagine my own inner room. Always thick stone, whitewashed walls, a little window for a shaft of changing light, an open fire and a stool.

Scripture is silent about Mary. All we are told is that she lived in the Galilean hill town of Nazareth and was betrothed to a man named Joseph, whose descendents were from Bethlehem. As a young woman and virgin – remember that culturally no young woman could be betrothed if she was not untouched. There is no difference in the word for young woman and the word for virgin in ancient Hebrew. The betrothal would have been arranged by parents, as was the custom, and still is in many parts of the world today. Scripture is silent about Mary's thoughts about her betrothal. As with all the countless young women sold to older men throughout history, she had no right to question the decision of her parents. Nobody knows if Mary wanted to be married.

I wonder if Mary would rather have stayed in her inner room watching the light change, listening to the sounds of the garden.

The Angel Gabriel knew who to ask. God sent the Angel to Mary knowing Mary would say yes. Mary had been a contemplative all her life. It's what she was made for. It's why she was special and why Joseph, a man known for his visions, so a reasonable match maybe, was willing to keep her. Joseph co-operated because he understood her calling.

Mary was a visionary and a prophet. How else would a young woman in Galilee be able to articulate the profound song of liberation she sang in response to her cousin, Elizabeth's, greeting on hearing the news of the child leaping in her womb? One of the most ancient Christian hymns, the Magnificat or Song of Mary, is still sung/recited daily at evening prayers by Christians from all traditions across the world.

As we approach once again the feast of the incarnation this Christmas, let us rejoice. with Mary, for the knowledge that with God all things are possible.

Amen.