

Reflection for May 2022

Theme: Mary

*Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow;
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go.*

*It followed her to school one day,
Which was against the rule;
It made the children laugh and play
To see a lamb at school.*

*And so the teacher turned it out,
But still it lingered near,
And waited patiently about
Till Mary did appear.*

*Why does the lamb love Mary so?
The eager children cry;
Why, Mary loves the lamb, you know,
The teacher did reply.*

Mary would hardly have been 13 or 14 years when the angel Gabriel visited her, for this was the normal age when Jewish girls were betrothed. What is the response of this teenage girl when she meets this heavenly being? We take this text so much for granted that we literally miss out on the surprise St. Luke wants us to experience. Look at any of the angelic visitations in the Bible, the first response is one of fear and after a reassuring ‘Do not fear’ from the angel, is the person able to respond positively, if at all. Not so with Mary. She takes the whole visitation in a manner quite unusual for an adult, what to say of a child all of 14. No wonder there is something special about this teenager!

Let us pay attention to what happens at the Annunciation

“Hail, full of Grace, the Lord is with you!”

Since we pray these words ever so often, it is quite natural that we miss out on the significance of this greeting. No one in biblical history has been addressed quite like this. What would this have meant for a young Jewish girl? Archangel Gabriel says three quite startling things to her in the opening lines – she is beckoned to “rejoice”, she is addressed as “full of grace” and she is assured that the “Lord is with you”.

Rejoice

While in most bible translations and in our Rosary we use the word “Hail”, the Greek word *Chaire* means more than a perfunctory “Hello”. It literally means “Rejoice”. This *rejoice* was usually used within a special context. The Daughter of Zion (a title for the city of Jerusalem) was called upon to rejoice in the expectant hope of the future messianic king to rule over her and also in the hope of future joy when God will rescue his people.

We find in the prophet Zephaniah

Sing aloud (chaire), O Daughter of Zion; shout O Israel!

Rejoice and Exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!

The Lord hashas cast our your enemies.

*The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear no more evil (Zeph 3:14)*

For centuries the Jewish people had waited and prayed for the messianic age to dawn. And now finally the day had arrived. The angel announces to Mary that the Lord, the King is coming to his people to establish his kingdom (Lk 1:31-33,35). And this announcement begins with the call to Rejoice. Mary the first recipient of the good news is called to Rejoice in what the good Lord is going to accomplish especially in and through her.

Full of Grace

The second word that is startling is how the angel addresses her. He does not call her Mary as would have been proper. He addresses her as 'Full of Grace'. Here the words 'full of Grace' is not a series of adjectives, but a new name that is given to Mary. In the Biblical understanding, a change of name is a revelation of who the person is and also a call which the person is entrusted with. For example, Abram's name is changed to Abraham which meant "father of a multitude", and true enough he became exactly that (Gen 17). Simon's name is changed to Peter meaning "rock" and on that rock Christ built his Church (Mt 16).

The word in Greek used for 'full of grace' is *kecharitomene*. This is a special word with no other occurrence in biblical literature. As Edward Sri says, the word means "graced" and describes someone who has been and continues to be graced. The full import of this is that God has specially filled her with **Grace** and continues to endow her with Grace, with no resistance of sin in her. This is one of the important points for the drawing of the dogma of the *Immaculate Conception*.

Is it any wonder therefore that when we approach her with love and tenderness we too are graced and often overcome mysteriously deep addictions or tendencies which so obstinately cling to us? No wonder Mary is known as the 'Undoer of Knots'.

The Lord is with you

This again is not just a blessing, or a wish from the angel to Mary, rather a coded phrase which any Jew would have understood as having a responsibility attached with it. When God called the mighty men and women for a task concerning his chosen people Israel and their salvation, the mandate would invariably contain the words 'the lord is with you'. The person addressed knew that the mission entrusted would demand great generosity and exemplary sacrifice of him or her. However, in spite of all odds and impossibilities, the constant assurance of his presence was promised. The weight of the responsibility was that the future of Israel would depend on how the person so assured was going to respond. E.g. Jacob (Gen 28:15), Moses (Ex 3:12), Joshua (Jos 1:5), David (2 Sam 7:9), Jeremiah (Jer 1:8) etc.

Is it any wonder that she is troubled by this greeting? It was not the angelic being who troubled her but the message he conveyed to her through his greeting. This young girl immediately picks up that something unique and daunting is being demanded of her.

When the details of what is expected of her in conceiving a child without being married and everything else that it would entail, is opened up to her, what will her response be? Will she be open to the limitless possibilities (and troubles) that her ‘Yes’ would entail, or would she go back to her simple life, trying to make peace with the fact that something so dramatic or big is beyond her. Fortunately, for us and for the whole humankind, Mary unflinchingly opens herself to not just say ‘Yes’ but does it without so much as even a slight protest with humble sentiments like ‘I am not worthy’. Rather, she says something quite the same in a different way – *I am the handmaid (slave girl) of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word* (Lk 1:38). It is as if she not only says YES but grants permission to God to do whatever He thinks best beyond all that she can understand or feel.

Annunciations in our life

Often, like Mary, we too face annunciations which may not involve an angelic being but the demands are quite the same. This could be in the shape of a demand of a Superior to entrust us with a particular task or responsibility. It could take the form of a suggestion by a community sister or friend to take up something which carries with it the stamp of a divine demand. It could be in the cry of a needy mother/ child/family who have been deprived of something rightfully theirs or left to fend for themselves or who have been shown the door by someone they turned to for help, and in some strange way, we feel burdened to shoulder not just their trouble, but to do everything within and beyond our power to set it right. It could take the shape of divine inspiration to do something which, if our Rules permit, could take myriad other shapes as the creativity of the Spirit allows.

We too feel troubled and overwhelmed with ‘interruptions’ like the above when our **Yes** has permitted God to step in and surprise us. What is our response to these unexpected visitors who come into our personal spaces and disrupt the quiet predictability of the mundane and calm which we are quite used to? Do we like Mary respond with openness and trust, not knowing what it entails or would we like to go about not being challenged, feeling unprepared or unwilling to take up what the *‘Lord is with you’* is throwing at us?

Learning from Mary

Pondering

Mary, though ‘greatly troubled’ about the greeting, in her own quiet way she ‘considered’ what this greeting could mean. The Greek word used *‘dielozizeto’* is derived from the root word meaning ‘dialogue’. This term denotes an intense, extended reflection, and one that triggers a strong faith. What it means is that in spite of the apparent contradictions and puzzlements of the ‘hows’ and ‘whens’ of the angel’s greeting, Mary does not turn away from the Lord’s call. Pope Benedict XVI reflecting on this text states, “Mary enters into a dialogue with the Word that has been given her; she speaks to it and lets it speak to her in order to fathom its meaning”.

The word ‘Pondering’ in our current usage could sometimes carry connotations of “brooding” or “anxious worrying” yet it is anything but that. It is staying with what

troubles us, what we cannot understand, without resistance or reaction, allowing the Lord to reveal what He is saying to us in those moments.

*What do we do when seemingly meaningless suffering disrupts our daily routine or when we are 'greatly troubled'? Do we ponder over the things we don't understand? Do we treasure the little, everyday annunciations no matter the disguise they come in?
Standing*

Mary pondered in the great (Luke 2:19) and not so great moments like losing her son and getting a not so polite response on her motherly concern being voiced (Lk 2:51). She would have pondered when there was no place in the inn, when the crowd called her son a mad man. It was her pondering, above all, and believing in the "Lord is with you", even when her son was bleeding and dying that enabled her to be standing under the Cross. She is neither shrieking in protest at the apparent injustice and brutality nor is passively resigned in 'what can I do' helplessness. Hers is a resolute standing, absorbing the pain, humiliation and injustice of the heinous crucifixion, transforming the bitterness and malice into a living sacrifice of love and surrender. Any lesser mortal would have fainted and lost her bearings. It is only years of pondering over the little moments that will help us stand in the storms of life.

Like the little lamb that waits patiently for Mary and follows her wherever she goes, may we do the same. Though Mary's call is unique and unparalleled, we too, in our own ways, have been called by the good Lord to do something which we would rather not want to do. Could we learn from Mary to 'dialogue' and 'ponder' in these moments, particularly when the tide is against us and all hope seems lost and believing seems to be like clutching at the straws in a cyclone. Life will bring to us situations which will require us to be 'standing' under the cross, in our apparent helplessness, yet may we know that it is only standing that is required of us: *"Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand."* (Eph 6:13)

Questions for reflection?

- What is our current response to the 'annunciations in our life'?
- Looking back at your life, what are some of the moments you feel you pondered and remained standing as Mary did? What are the moments you would have liked to handle differently?