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Dean's SERMONS

Lady Day March 2005

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Today's gospel is Luke's account of the annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The archangel Gabriel was sent by God to Mary, a virgin engaged to Joseph but not yet married. Gabriel announced to her that she was to give birth to a son, Jesus, who will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel for ever; his reign shall never end. To Mary's perplexed question, "How shall this be?" Gabriel answers, somewhat enigmatically, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it be as you have said." Then the angel left her.

This story has fascinated artists through the ages. There are countless attempts to give pictorial expression to its message. The moment is foundational for the Christian faith, at almost every level. It speaks first and foremost of personal faith, the encounter between the individual and God – the inner voice of comfort. It lays the ground for Christian theology (the way we understand and speak of God, particularly God's action in the world). The God we worship is the God of history, who intervenes in the affairs of this world to bring new life and hope in the face of brokenness. It is the beginning of Christology (what we can say about the person and work of Jesus Christ, the son of God and of Mary, fully human fully divine – Immanuel – God with us.) It carries in it deepest implications for ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church).

In this sermon, I'd like to examine three pictorial expressions of the Annunciation. I have chosen them because they offer three very different, but complementary, views of the event and its implications for the faith and practice of the Church. Inevitably the inclusion of three images necessitates the exclusion of many more – but the three I've chosen are in a sense representative as well as individual.

I begin with the painting by Leonardo da Vinci. Born in 1452 in Vinci in the Republic of Florence [now in Italy] he died on May 2, 1519 at Cloux in France. Da Vinci was a painter, draftsman, sculptor, architect, and engineer whose genius, perhaps more than that of any other figure, epitomized the Renaissance humanist ideal.

The first thing we notice in this picture is the almost complete absence of any otherworldly influence. This is theology from below, long before any theologian had systematised the concept. Gabriel's wings suggest or point to his heavenly origin. That apart, the angel is very human – all too human. There's no image of God. The Holy Spirit, most often represented by a dove is absent. No radiance of clouds of glory or heavenly host. The merest of halos graces Mary's head. The place of *this* encounter is here, in this world.

The second significant feature is that Mary is in control. Her face is almost imperious. The angel is deferring, supplicant. His hand is raised, his eyes lowered to the ground. This seems almost a reversal of Luke's account. The sense that Mary has a real choice, that she has the power to fulfil the divine plan of salvation or frustrate it is given full expression.

The third feature to be noted is the background. The background shows the Florentine countryside. In the distance we catch a glimpse of the town. The whole image is couched in the context of da Vinci's own time and place, fifteenth century Italy. The artist seems to be telling us that the moment of choice, the moment of faith is to be found in the hereness and nowness of ordinary, everyday life.

This is a painting about personal faith, in the immediacy of this world. The angel's wings hint at the mysterious element of faith. The deeper implications of faith are, however, shrouded. If Mary assents to the demand of God as relayed by the angel, it's not clear where her choice will take her. Faith, at least according to Leonardo, begins in the immediacy of everyday life, and takes one on a journey to who knows where.

The second painting is by Paolo Veronese. He was born in 1528 in Verona, and died in 1588 in Venice. Veronese was an Italian Renaissance painter, one of the great masters of the Venetian School. Originally named Paolo Caliari, he was called Veronese from his native city of Verona, where he learned painting from Antonio Badile, a capable exponent of the conservative local tradition. That tradition remained fundamental to Veronese's style throughout his career, even after he moved to

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Venice in 1553.

If da Vinci's rendition represents theology 'from below', Veronese is unashamedly painting theology 'from above'. God figures focally in this picture. He is the author of events, brooding over the encounter, supported by cherubs and angels. Veronese's Annunciation is also Trinitarian. The Holy Spirit is present in the encounter in the person of the dove, surrounded by light. The third person of the Trinity is taking shape in his earthly mother's womb.

For Veronese, the angel is in control. His gaze is intently upon Mary, so much so that she cannot sustain it, and looks demurely down. Her body language is closed – the enormity of the demand being made of her is clear from her demeanour. This is a painting about God's agency in the world, and in the experience of faith. Whatever is the agent by which faith is enlivened, God lies at the back of the encounter as the unseen but directing presence. If da Vinci talks of faith, Veronese wants to show us faith **IN GOD**.

The final painting is arguably the most interesting, although it is of much less artistic merit than the two masters. The artist here is a Vietnamese, Nguyen Dinh Dang. Born in Hanoi in 1958, he is a highly qualified physicist, holding degrees of Ph.D. in nuclear theory and the highest degree of Doctor of Physics and Mathematics Sciences from Moscow State University (Moscow , Russia). He is a self-taught painter.

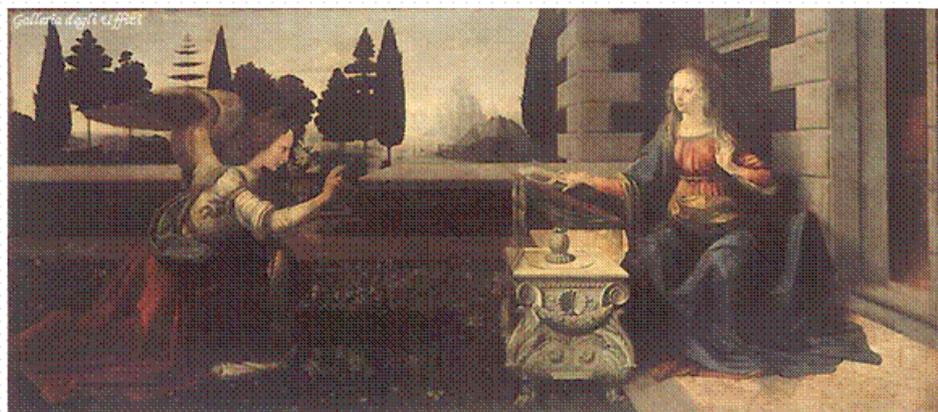
The first thing one notices about this work is that his cultural heritage imposes itself on the motif. If the figures are dressed in classical western garments, their faces disclose that they are Asian, not European or Middle Eastern. Like Veronese and da Vinci, the story is filtered through his cultural eyes. The background scenery looks like the rural Vietnamese countryside.

God the Father is not expressly present here. The supernatural nature of the encounter is suggested, as in da Vinci's picture by the angel wings. The eyes of Mary and Gabriel are locked together in the intimacy of the moment. Edwin Muir caught the sense of this intimate encounter supremely in one of his poems...

***See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,
Each reflects the other's face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there...
But through the endless afternoon
These neither speak nor movement make,
But stare into their deepening trance
As if their gaze would never break.***

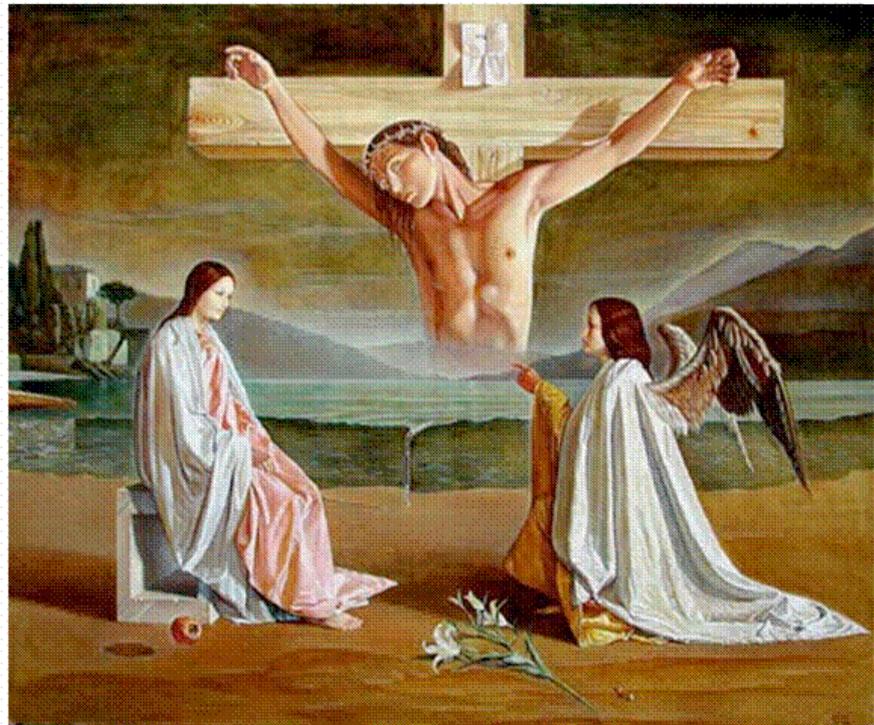
The most striking element of the picture is not, however Mary and the angel. Brooding over the encounter, establishing its essential nature and tone is the bust of the crucified Christ. This is the focus of the encounter. If you take the step of faith, Dinh Dang seems to be saying, if you say to God, let it be to me according to your will, then you must know that sooner or later that choice will lead you to the cross, both your own in this world, and Christ's. It's surely not coincidental that this image was painted by a North Vietnamese, born in 1958 whose most formative years were spent under the influence of the brutal and cynical war, which so devastated his homeland.

Our three paintings, therefore, tell us much about the Annunciation. They point to faith as personal encounter. They emphasise that the encounter takes place in our own cultural and historical context. We look for God in the here and now. The religious sphere is not somehow magically removed from the rest of our life. They point to the fact that it's God who takes the initiative in the encounter. God so loves the world **and us** that he comes to us in the person of Jesus, and invites us into relationship with him. God is for us. No matter who we are, and what we are, God calls us to new life in him. Finally they point to the fact that faith leads directly to the cross, and through the cross, to the resurrection. The God who became human for us in Christ offers us hope in the face of the ambiguities of this mortal life, for in the Christ event all that alienates us from God and from ourselves has been overcome.



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