

Canterbury Diocese Clergy Conference

Friday

Luke 1:26-38

I have never been so comprehensibly put down as by a four-year-old girl. She came into the room wearing a white, frilly costume with wings, so I asked her, 'Are you an angel or a fairy?' She looked at me as if I knew nothing, and said, 'I'm a fairy, because fairies are white – angels are gold!' I did my doctoral thesis on angels but I never knew that. At the time, I was wearing some gold cords and a gold clerical shirt, so I said, 'Ah, well, then, I must be an angel!' To which I got the withering response, '*That* is orange!'

Children often have strong views on angels. Two sisters were arguing about which of them had the more important role in the Nativity Play – and one of them brought the argument to a triumphant conclusion by saying, 'You ask Mummy – she'll tell you that it's harder to be a virgin than to be an angel.'

One nine-year-old said when interviewed, 'Everybody's got it wrong. Angels don't wear halos any more. I forget why but scientists are working on it.'

Well, I hesitate to contradict a nine-year-old, especially after my experience with the four-year-old, but I rather doubt that many scientists *are* working on it. And that's one of the problems with the Annunciation, isn't it? The gospels will insist on dressing up the birth of Jesus with such metaphysical baggage as angels and virgin births, which makes people wonder how reliable the *whole thing* is. Our familiarity with the story masks the astonishing oddness of the whole narrative, with people chatting casually away to a supernatural being which seems hard for people today to differentiate from the tooth fairy.

Our contemporaries are prepared to give it some cultural house space at Christmas, but they don't expect it to have anything to do with the *real* world, the world in which we actually live, the world in which people who chat to supernatural beings tend to be somewhat unhinged, and people who get pregnant tend to have more prosaic explanations for their condition than the one that Mary was arguably fortunate to persuade Joseph of.

And yet. We may be guilty of a degree of chronological snobbery here. We tend to see previous generations as being completely credulous about such matters. But Mary was not casual about her conversation with the angel – she was absolutely terrified, and the angel had to reassure her. Meeting such a being was no more part of *her* everyday experience than it is part of *ours*. And Joseph didn't need modern science to tell him where babies come from – that's why he sought to put Mary away quietly. Virgin births were no part of his everyday world, either.

More than that, we need the Annunciation to offer us something *outside* of the ordinary, because the ordinary is part of the problem.

Ordinary life is good. Ordinary life is where things of great value happen – friendships, creativity, art, music, scientific discovery, technical advance, the beauty of the natural world, accomplishment, kindness, romantic love, parental love, compassion, exploration. Ordinary life is good.

But ordinary life is also where pain happens, and betrayal, and prejudice; where love can be rejected as well as reciprocated; where people's mobility and ability to communicate can be taken from them in an instant; and where it will *all* be taken away in due course. Another nine-year-old said of angels, 'Angels talk all the way while they're flying you up to heaven. The basic message is where you went wrong before you got dead.' The last problem with ordinary life is that it doesn't last – we all get dead.

Ordinary life is good, but it is laced with threat, it seldom satisfies fully, and it comes to an end.

So if ordinary life is to be healed of its current tendency to frustrate and its absolute terminus in the grave, it needs resources other than its own; it needs something from outside of itself; it needs the *extraordinary*.

Could it be that angels and virgin births and the rest of the Christmas clobber are the 'extraordinary' that can finally bring healing to the ordinary? Could they be part of the resources from outside that might save our good, rich, delightful ordinary life from being tragically marred, insufficient and ephemeral? We find them difficult because they are so alien to us, so outside our experience of ordinary life. Yet it is their very outsideness, their very extraordinariness that may offer hope to the ordinary.

You can take out the angels and the virgin conception, and that might make the Annunciation/ Christmas story more believable. But it might also make it correspondingly less worth believing. Because it would leave us with nothing outside the terminal structures within which we are otherwise confined.

I've been asked to speak in these Biblical Expositions under the general title of 'Provisions for the Journey'. And the first provision I want to suggest that we put into our corporate rucksack this morning from this story is **an openness to the extraordinary otherness of God.**

The second suggestion for the rucksack – it's a bit like Room 101, isn't it? Though I'm afraid you don't get to vote on whether it goes in or not! The second suggestion for the rucksack from this story is **an insistence on the engagement of God with the real world.**

You remember the Labour MP who took his oath to the Crown with his fingers crossed behind his back? Well, I suspect that the bit of the creed most frequently said with fingers crossed behind one's back is 'who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary'. Thankfully, people don't usually see clergy crossing their fingers behind their backs – which is a good argument against east-facing celebration, of course! But why do we have problems with the Virgin Conception? Why do we find it so difficult?

Partly because of what we have just been exploring, that it lies outside our usual experience. But more especially, I suspect, because philosophical developments of the last five hundred years have taught us to allow that God can work in the mental and spiritual realms, but to shy away from the idea that He might work in the physical and material realms. The Reformation emphasised the internal disposition of the heart rather than the outward observance of ritual – it's what goes on inside me that matters. The religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries nudged religion out of the public realm into the realm of private opinion, so that people wouldn't fight about what they believed. The rise of Science threatened to leave no room for God, so, to protect Him, for His own good He was moved for safe-keeping to the realm of personal experience. The Romantic Movement saw emotion and imagination as the highest faculties, and positively reveled in the inner life.

This whole cumulative set of movements shaped the way we instinctively think about God. That's part of the reason why people began to think of the Resurrection as an event in the minds of the disciples – an internal event - rather than an event in the 'real world'.

And that's why people began to have a problem with the Virgin Conception, because it was inextricably about God's involvement in the structures of the real world – genetics, reproduction, birth. 'In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee.' Something came from God, from the Other, from outside - into our world, into a particular bit of our time (the sixth month) and into a particular bit of our space (Nazareth). We need resources from outside, but we need them to engage healingly with this world, our world, the world of space and time. We need them to engage with all the dimensions of what is wrong with our world – and that includes the physical, the genetic, the political, the public, and the very structures of our existence.

Because those structures are part of the problem. It is the structures of the natural order that make most creatures live under constant threat and die a violent death. It is the structures of death and decay that militate against meaning and hope.

If God cannot enter the structures and bring His transforming power to bear *there*, then there is no hope that our world will ever be free.

The Virgin Conception insists that He can. It insists that God can work in the broken structures of our world to bring about His healing purposes. He is not restricted to the world of the mind, the inner world, the world of the spirit. He is able to work in wombs and tombs. He is able to work in cells and fallopian tubes. I'm fully aware of the difficult questions this view raises – I've given my intellectual life to them, and we'll touch on

them tomorrow. But as the late John Updike said in his poem on the resurrection, ‘if the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindle, the church will fall.’ Because ultimately, if we do not have a God who can access all areas, then we have nothing to say that will be of relevance to our world.

The Virgin Conception insists that we do.

So that’s the second provision from this story – an insistence on the engagement of God in the real world.

The third provision for the journey is **a flourishing under the graciousness of God.**

There was a couple who desperately wanted to adopt. They filled in all the forms, had all the interviews and the counselling, and finally were offered a newly born Russian baby. They delightedly accepted, and, on the way home, they stopped off at the local college to enrol in night school. ‘And why do you want to learn Russian?’ said the administrator? ‘Well’, they said, ‘we’re about to adopt a Russian baby. In a couple of years, she’ll be starting to speak and we want to be able to understand her.’

One of the things that is most theologically significant about the Virgin Conception is that it is a bastion against Adoptionism.

Adoptionism: the belief that Jesus was not Son of God from conception, but was *adopted* as God’s Son at some later point (usually His Baptism). Adoptionists believed that Jesus was not always divine, but *became* divine in later life.

The effect of this view was to turn the good news into bad news. Because if He was adopted because of His goodness, then Christianity becomes a religion of moral demand and of condemnation. He could do it, why can’t you? Jesus becomes just an example, and, as Jane Williams has pointed out, ‘If Jesus is just an example to us, then we have had it. The example of goodness has always existed in human beings, here and there, and most of us have proved perfectly able to resist its lure.’ (Jane seems to me to have got closer than most – to goodness, that is, not to resisting its lure.)

The Virgin Conception says No. He did not become divine. He did not achieve divinity. He was always divine, from the very first moment of His incarnate existence. He is therefore not a mere human who did better than we do: He is God, come to restore us.

The Virgin Conception thus preserves Christianity as a religion of grace. And God as a God of grace.

That seems to me to be vital, not only because moralism is so unattractive, but also because it doesn’t work. Telling people to be morally up to snuff, telling them that they will only be acceptable if morally they come up to snuff, doesn’t inspire people morally to come up to snuff.

When I was a College Chaplain, I saw a lot of students working every hour they had to try and get a first. Often when I spoke to them, the same story would emerge. What drove them was the desire to be acceptable to their parents. I'm sure it was never verbalized like this, but the message they had imbibed was, 'Get a first, and I'll love you. Make me proud of you, and I'll accept you. Impress, and I'll have time for you.' Now, there is nothing wrong with aiming for a first. There are plenty of good and healthy motivations for wanting to do well. But the desire to make oneself accepted is not one of them. And this desire drove them at a manic speed down the narrowest of channels.

I suggest that that is a psychological version of the moral message of adoptionism. You are not accepted – you need to achieve acceptance. And the Virgin Conception says, No. Jesus didn't have to impress to be adopted. He didn't have to perform to hear the words 'You are Son, whom I love.' That lovedness was what He worked from, not what He had to work for.

And it's the same for us.

A flourishing under the graciousness of God.

The fourth piece of equipment for the rucksack is **a reflection of the respectfulness of God.**

Tom Smail remarks that 'The gift of the Spirit is in no sense imposed upon the Virgin Mary but is gladly received by her.' The Holy Spirit will not come upon her, and the power of the Most High will not overshadow her without what von Balthasar calls 'the handmaid's discreet Yes, the consent to be possessed, to be at God's disposal.'

Greek and Roman gods were not so respectful of us and our freedom and our choices. Jupiter often came down in various physical forms to rape mortals of both genders.

The God we meet in the Virgin Conception will not act in, on and through Mary without her consent. Same throughout the life and ministry of Jesus. When a town asked Him to leave, He left. When, after the resurrection, He walked to Emmaus with two of His disciples, He made as if to go on – and only when they invited Him to stay with them did He enter in. 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock', says the Jesus of the book of Revelation. He doesn't take the approach that Asterix's friend Obelix took to closed doors.

He will not force us.

Again, when I was a College Chaplain, I remember walking through the College with the Master, and the huge decibelage of some evangelist was being projected from a mega sound system in the park beside the College so that we could hardly talk. What I did hear the Master say was, 'Why are Christians always so intrusive?'

If we would imitate our respectful God, we need to ask ourselves on what sensitivities we trample uninvited. The respectfulness of God.

The fifth and final provision that I want to suggest for the journey from the Annunciation story is **a confidence in the uncompetitiveness of God**. Let me explain what I mean. I'm going to inflict on you an appalling Christmas cracker joke: what do you get if you cross a turkey and a fairy? Answer: a goblin. (Don't say I didn't warn you.)

When you cross one animal with another, what you get is a cross between the two. If you cross a donkey and a horse, you get a mule, which is half donkey, half horse.

So why, when you cross divinity and humanity do you not get someone who is half divine and half human? Why do you not get a hybrid? Why do you get someone who is fully divine and fully human?

Well, I suggest because when *I* relate to someone, I draw out bits of who they are, but not other bits. Because I am finite and because I am quite competitive, I enable bits of who they are to come alive and to flourish, but I screen out other aspects of who they are, of the person they could be.

But God, being infinite and uncompetitive, draws *all* of who they intrinsically are out of them, all that they have it in them to be. He suppresses nothing. He enables every part of them to flourish and to develop and to grow.

With Him, no bit of who we are needs to be lopped off. No bit needs to be excised. Nothing has to be left behind or given up – only the things that stop us from being the people we truly are. Only sin needs to be lopped – none of our humanity.

That is why, when divinity met humanity at the Virgin Conception, nothing divine or human needed to be lopped off or left behind. Jesus is not a cross between God and Humanity, not a compromise between divinity and humanity, but fully both – because God enables everything to be itself. As our Archbishop is fond of saying, 'God does not compete with us for space'. His nature co-exists with Mary's nature and in no way squeezes it out.

I'd like to illustrate this with a visual aid. Visual aids are always dangerous. There was the temperance preacher who used a visual aid to impress on people the evils of drink. He would say, 'I have here a glass of whiskey and a glass of water. And I have here a worm. I am now going to put the worm into the glass of water.' So he popped the poor worm into the glass of water, and it went wriggle, wriggle, wriggle, wriggle, wriggle, wriggle. Then he took it out of the glass of water and put it into the glass of whiskey, and the worm went wriggle, wriggle, phlat! and lay motionless on the bottom of the glass. 'Now what is the moral of this experiment?' asked the preacher with a flourish. To which someone shouted out, 'If you've got worms, drink whiskey!'

So I'm taking something of a risk.

Placed a golf ball into a completely full glass of water, displacing the water and making a mess on the tray. Poured lots of salt into another completely full glass of water, without displacing any water.

The Church has often presented God as if He displaced the other activities of human life. As if somehow you had to choose between Him and ordinary human life. The Church has often presented God as the cuckoo in the nest of our humanity, who will take over and, in time, squeeze everything else out till it's only religious things that you are doing. During the year of depression and doubt I went through before my ordination, this was my big fear. That God was so important that I would have to spend all my time doing religious activities, and would not be able to justify doing the ordinary things of life I so enjoyed – like going for walks in the fells, listening to music, and going to cafés with my friends.

Sometimes the hymns that we sing have reinforced this idea of God being in competition with every other joy:

Hark! how the heavenly music drowns
all music but its own.

Nothing else can survive. The music of God is in competition with all other strains. What it wants to do is to swamp them, drown them out.

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Be all else but nought to be, save that Thou art.

Nothing else matters. Only God matters. Everything else is nothing.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

The Virgin Conception teaches us the opposite. The Virgin Conception teaches us that the things of earth will become strangely *bright* in the light of His glory and grace. The things of earth will become fully themselves, more fully themselves than they could otherwise be – the things of earth will now be given a significance they would not otherwise have by being related to the infinite, and will one day be freed from their ephemerality and all the sadness, fear and frustration that flows from that ephemerality.

A while ago, a man who was suffering from depression came to see me pastorally. Having suffered from depression myself, I can sometimes see something of the root of people's depression, but this time I just couldn't. I went through my usual mental checklist, but nothing seemed to mesh. In the end, we were just chatting, and I asked him what he wanted to do when he left university. He said, 'Well, what I'd like to do is an art

course, but of course I couldn't justify that.' I asked what he meant, and he said, 'Well, it wouldn't advance the kingdom, would it?' To which I said, 'Ah! I think we might just have found the root of your depression.'

No part of our humanity gets squeezed out of us by the presence of God. And if we repress parts of ourselves in His name, then, like anything else we repress, it will find a way of resurfacing, as anger, frustration, depression or doubt. It will find a painful way out.

See God as a golf ball, see Him as displacing other activities, other aspects of your humanity, and He'll always be a threat to you, to who you are.

See Him as the salt permeating your whole being, and displacing nothing that isn't inherently sinful, and you'll experience God as the Source, the Healer, the midwife and the eternal guarantor of who you intrinsically are.

Now, we are mainly clergy here this morning. One or two normal people, but mainly clergy! You remember what Sidney Smith said about clergy being like manure – thinly spread they do a lot of good, but all in a heap they're very unpleasant!

I don't think most clergy are in danger of thinking of God as being golf-ball-like. I suspect that if I asked you, 'Do you think that following God should displace a whole tranche of other human activities, you'd say, 'No, of course not.' But if you're anything like me, the danger is not that we think that with our minds (though the hymns don't help, I think) – the danger is that our lives, with all their busyness and all their activity on God's behalf, in practice proclaim a golf-ball god. In practice, other aspects of who we are get squeezed out, and the world around can get the message that you have to choose between godliness and humanity.

Our jobs may ask us to choose, our own brokenness may ask us to choose. But God doesn't. The Virgin Conception teaches us that there is no contradiction between godliness and humanity. And the closer we get to God, the more fully human we become.