

Archbishop's Easter Sermon, Canterbury Cathedral
Sunday 27 March 2005

Death, says St Paul, is our enemy; and Christians are the most pitiable of all people if their hope is confined to this life. To many modern ears, these statements sound a bit suspect. Isn't this the kind of religion we have learned to be wary of, a religion that justifies suffering and frustration here and now by the promise of compensation somewhere else? And as for regarding death as an enemy – is this more than the childish resentment of human beings who haven't yet accepted their limitations? One of the great books of the twentieth century, by a man who had read Freud more intelligently than most, was called *The Denial of Death*, and it spelled out the evil consequences of this refusal to face our limits, the anxiety and unreality and psychological fragility that could distort lives lived in this state of denial.

The longing for everlasting life takes strange forms. There are people who obsessively investigate the evidence for spiritualist phenomena, people who have their bodies cryogenically frozen in the hope of resuscitation, people who claim that their diet and lifestyle is slowing down the ageing process. And of course when you think of things like this, you realise that it isn't simply certain kinds of religion that produce odd and unhealthy attitudes to ageing or limitation or death. Quite a lot of our contemporary culture is actually shot through with a resentment of limits and the passage of time, anger at what we can't do, fear or even disgust at growing old. Ernest Becker's book, referred to a moment ago, was directed not against religion as such but against a climate of fantasy encouraged by cheap psychology ('you can be anything you choose to be') and a childlike faith in technology.

Now St Paul doesn't show too many obvious signs of resenting human limitations or indeed wanting not to die – after all, he tells us in all kinds of ways in the course of his letters that we have to let our self-protective instincts 'die' as we

grow into the full scope of love for God and each other; so he can hardly be recommending to us the kind of attitude that gave Freud and Nietzsche so much material for criticism. What then is he saying here? And how do we hear it now as good news?

The first thing to notice is something that has been said countless times, yet we still miss it. Paul does not say that we shall live for ever; he says that we shall die and that we shall be raised as Jesus was raised. Forget spiritualism and cryogenics; forget supposed evidence for 'survival'. Paul doesn't think we are going to survive but that we are going to live again because of God's action. Here and now, we must indeed once to terms with the reality of death, and we must put to death all in us that binds us to our narrow self-interest. Indeed, you could rightly say that Paul's teaching is really that we must put to death our refusal to die, because that refusal to die, that fearful denial of our limits, is the root of our selfish and self-paralysing habits of sin. A healthy human environment is one in which we try to make sense of our limits, of the accidents that can always befall us and the passage of time which inexorably changes us. An unhealthy environment is one in which we always look for someone to blame and someone to compensate us, and struggle to maintain fictions of our invulnerability to time and change.

Societies as well as individuals fall victim to these diseases. We react so often with panic and hostility to the presence of persons and cultures who are different and blame them for our own dysfunctions. We maintain a ludicrous confidence in technology to solve the environmental problems it has itself intensified because we can't believe that our capacity to generate wealth and comfort for ourselves is anything other than infinite. We fantasise about a state of security so complete that nothing and no-one will ever threaten us. We need to hear that all this is really the denial of death – that it is what Paul elsewhere calls 'the works of the flesh', the closing up of ourselves in the face of a reality we can't fully control.

What Paul is telling us is this. If your hope is that this life will be protected and prolonged, that your comfort zone as you understand it will never be challenged, that you will never have to face the reality of being mortal and limited, God help you. It's a recipe for illusion, terror and the killing of the soul. But that doesn't mean that your 'real' life only begins on the far side of death. Rather it means that here and now you learn to live not by self-defence but by opening up to what God gives.

Because that is the essence of belief in the resurrection. It is not a matter of natural survival, not a right we can demand from God, but a gift. God has promised to be our God, he has promised to hold us in relationship with himself whatever happens to us. Remember the end of Romans chapter 8? 'There is nothing in death or life...nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'. He has committed himself to be there for us by his own gracious decision; we face death knowing that his promise has been given – but not knowing (as St Paul goes on to say) just how the promise will be honoured. All we can guess is that our present life has the same relation to the future as the seed has to the full-grown plant. Not survival, but growth into an unimaginably greater dimension. If we now begin to live in a way that gives priority to God's promise and gift, to live in trust and generosity, we shall not be haunted and imprisoned by fear of death. We have begun to live the kind of life that can cope with death because it simply looks for God's gift at every point.

So the importance of Jesus' resurrection is not that it somehow proves there is life after death in a general sort of way. What it proves is that God keeps his promises: the commitment of God the Father to Jesus his beloved son is absolute and eternal; so the cross does not separate Father and Son, and life is restored on the far side of the cross, life that both is and isn't like the ordinary physical life Jesus had in Galilee. And the divine promise Jesus, God among us, makes to his friends, the promise of mercy and renewal, is absolute; not even the unfaithfulness of the disciples can destroy it. Jesus' life is there for them once

more, the source of their joy and hope. The violent and terrible death of Jesus does not stop God from giving what he wants to give, giving consistently and steadily. If Jesus is raised, we can count on the faithfulness of God.

And perhaps we can dimly see why death can be called an enemy. Death seems to challenge the idea of an eternally faithful God; and it poses an obvious difficulty for any belief that God wants to develop with us a relationship that is always growing and developing. It looks as though death means that our relation with God comes to a halt, as if God eventually treats us as disposable. But if we see in Jesus' resurrection the confirmation that God is faithful, we can face death differently – not because it has stopped mattering or even hurting, not because we have assurance that we shall carry on as before (we shan't), but because God has not finished with us. We have more to receive from him, and he will create the conditions that will make it possible for us to receive.

Death will be the last enemy to be overcome, says Paul. At the end of everything, death will be behind us, death will be history. We shall have become what we have become because we have lived with death and learned how to love realistically and humbly, within the compass of a limited life. Death the enemy of our confidence has been a friend to us after all – an enemy we learn to love, as Christ tells us to love our enemies; and at the end of everything its work is done. What remains is only growth in love, as we stand with and in Jesus Christ looking into the inexhaustible depths of God's reality – the sea we must learn to swim in but will never cross over, as the Welsh poet Ann Griffiths put it in one of her hymns.

And here and now we are called on to challenge the denial of death that locks us into folly and fear; the pride and arrogance, the desperation and brittleness of our hopes. Easter proclaims to individuals and economic systems and governments alike that we shall not find life by refusing to let go of our precious, protected

selves. Let go with Christ, die into his love; and rise with Christ, opening yourself to the eternal gift of the Father.

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**The Round Church
at St Andrew the Great
Cambridge**

A Sermon Preached

on Friday 16th March 2001

by Mark Ashton

**Genesis 4: Am I my Brother's Keeper?
*How man approaches God***

At this point in the Bible's narrative, the focus narrows: no longer are we considering the great range of foundational truths of the first three chapters:

the sovereignty of God;

the nobility of the human race;

the value of the material world;

the dignity of work;

the sanctity of marriage;

the entry of sin into the world;

the entry of death through sin;

the reality and severity of judgement;

the glory of grace in the promise of a Saviour.

Chapter 4 becomes more domestic. Now the die is cast and the story moves inevitably and tragically forward.

What a way we have come from 2:25! Do you remember? ***The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.***

Now the first baby born is a killer, and the second is his victim. We have entered the world you and I know all too well. The description of Cain's family with which this chapter ends is a microcosm of humanity, with its pattern of technical and artistic prowess and moral failure. The central event of chapter 3 is now working itself out in humanity, and because the problem is rooted in the heart of human beings, it affects everything – even the family. Perhaps especially the family: the more intense the human relationship the more obvious the effects of my selfishness, of sin: on marriage, family, sibling rivalry. Which of us is not aware of conflict in these areas of our lives?

There is a story of two brothers who were backpacking together across the foothills of the Himalayas when they were students. They came one night to a small village where they were warned that the next stretch of the mountain track was frequented by a tiger that had taken to man-eating. They set out nervously the next morning hoping for a lift, but as the day wore on no vehicle came along the track. At last, in the evening, they could just see the distant lights of the next village, when there came a blood-curdling roar from the jungle beside the track. Both brothers began to run furiously towards the village side by side. But then one of the brothers stopped. He started to take off his hiking boots, open his backpack and get out a pair of running shoes. The other brother shouted urgently to him, "Don't be silly! You can't outrun a man-eating tiger." The first brother looked up and replied, "I don't have to outrun the tiger. I only have to outrun you!"

So our first heading is:-

1. Two different brothers

Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. (v 1)

Notice Eve's cry of delight – "Here is the offspring who will crush the serpent's head and reverse the curse!" - as God had promised back in chapter 3, verse 15. But alas no! She was horribly wrong there. But she was right to acknowledge that children are God's gift: ***"With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man."***

Despite all the control medical science has given us, childbirth remains an experience of common grace – and a powerful reminder that we are not our own. We belong to God and we owe our lives to God; and our children belong to God. We are not to appropriate them and behave as though we have a right to them, nor to regard them as our products. Family life goes wrong as soon as we forget that we do not have a right to have children; and, if we do have them, they do not belong to us. They belong to someone else.

Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. (vv 2-4)

Two different brothers, different in their work and their worship. This is all we are told. Nothing about their lives, nor about what prompted their offering, till we reach the puzzle of verses 4 and 5.

The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast. (vv 4, 5)

Notice we are not told how the Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering, and not on Cain and his offering; and, most puzzling, we are not told why. It seems unfair discrimination. There are two New Testament verses which shed some light on this.

We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. (I John 3:11,12)

Notice that that verse does not directly comment on why Cain's offering was rejected. It is only a comment on why Cain went on to murder his brother. But it does contrast the righteousness of Abel with the wickedness of Cain.

According to Genesis 4:5, God rejected Cain and his offering – so clearly Cain was in some sense objectionable to God. But it remains puzzling that Genesis does not state more plainly this link between Cain's lack of righteousness and his rejection by God.

2. Two different sacrifices

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. (Hebrews 11:4)

Here it is Abel's faith that is the distinguishing factor. Faith listens to what God has said and acts on it. So, if Abel was acting in faith, he must have been acting on something God had said. Perhaps God had already indicated that the appropriate offering to bring to God was the sacrifice of an animal. Sin had entered the world and its penalty was death (separation from God) so the offering for sin must also entail death.

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. (Hebrews 9:22)

Back at chapter 3, verse 21, God had provided animal skins to clothe Adam and Eve, which must have meant the slaughter of animals. As skins were the proper covering for sinners (and not the fig leaves they'd clothed themselves with earlier

in the chapter, 3:7), so animals (and not vegetables) were the proper sacrifice for sins (pointing us on to the Lamb of God who would die on the cross).

Moreover, after the curse pronounced by God in the previous chapter, the fruit of the ground would only be produced by the sweat and toil of man, so it symbolised human achievement. Perhaps Cain was offering a sample of his own horticultural achievement (like a gardener with his prize marrow), claiming that by his own effort he had overcome God's curse on the ground, and asking God to accept him on the basis of what he had done. While Abel, on the other hand, offered a substitute life in the place of his own, acknowledging the full extent of his guilt and his inability to save himself.

Now this undoubtedly casts light on the passage. But it is not what the passage itself seems to be teaching us. After all, nothing has yet been said before this in the Bible about God asking for animal sacrifices rather than vegetable ones; and, later in the Old Testament, God does accept cereal offerings (i.e. the fruit of the ground). So we must ponder these verses some more if we are to get the main point. Perhaps you would re-read carefully verses 3-5.

No reason is given. It is a glaring omission. God's acceptance of Abel is not portrayed as a reward for good behaviour or as an act of congratulation for correct religious technique. It does not say that Abel was better in any way. It is portrayed as an act of divine generosity, the sovereign choice of God.

If God accepts a human being, it is not because He must. It is because He chooses to do so. God did not have to accept either Cain or Abel. God cannot be manipulated, bribed or controlled by religious technique or moral performance. None of us has any hold over Him. We wish we did. Do you remember the story of the small boy writing a letter just before Christmas? 'Dear God,' he wrote, 'I've been good for a whole month now, please let me get a mountain bike for Christmas.' Then he stopped and thought, and he crossed out 'month' and wrote 'week', and then he crossed out 'week' and wrote 'day', and then he stopped

again. He got up from the table, walked over to the Christmas tree on the other side of the room, where there was a little crib scene with model figures, and he picked up the figure of Mary thoughtfully and walked back to the table. He put it down on the table in front of him, and then he began a new letter: 'If you ever want to see your mother again' But no-one has any hold on God.

The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. (vv 4, 5)

Cain and Abel do not represent two different religious techniques. They do not even primarily represent a good man and a bad man relating to God. They represent two different religious attitudes: **By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain.** (Hebrews 11:4)

Faith is not a technique – it is the recognition that there are no techniques when relating to God. I cannot persuade Him to accept me. I cannot threaten Him. I cannot bribe Him. He is not a slot machine God, to whom I can present the right coinage (of repentance or confession or whatever) and then receive the chocolate bar of acceptance by Him automatically. I can only throw myself on His mercy. I hear His word and trust myself to it.

In fact, this Genesis passage is not about what caused God to accept Abel and reject Cain. It is about what resulted from that rejection. So let's consider thirdly:

3. Two different responses

Look again at halfway through verse 5 and verse 6: **So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?"**

Cain and Abel shared the same creed. They believed the same things. But Cain was very angry when his offering was not accepted. Now that shows us that it cannot have been a case of Cain offering something cheap and slipshod and

lackadaisical, while Abel offered something careful and costly and sacrificial. Cain would not have been cross if he had been rejected on those grounds. His anger suggests that he had taken a lot of trouble over his offering. It had cost him time and money and energy. He is the religious person taking great trouble to approach God. It may be the ritualist through ceremonies or the moralist via good behaviour. But his approach to God is on his own terms. He would do certain things for God and then God would do certain things for him. And when it turns out that God does not play by man-made rules, he is indignant. He calls God arbitrary and unfair. How can we believe in a God who does not act according to our own religious notions?

The Cains of this world are very angry to discover that God insists on being God. He will not be controlled or manipulated by us. **So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.** (v. 5)

Hell is a very angry place. People there gnash their teeth because they are all convinced that they do not deserve to be there. God should not have done this to them. He should have acted according to their ideas about Him and behaved as they had decided He should. Cain was not a profane person. He was religious, but he was furious at God's refusal to accept him on his own terms.

But notice God's mercy:

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." (vv 6, 7)

There is a clear warning by God. Note the tense of verse 7. Sin is like a leopard ready to spring – **it desires to have you**, or as Moffat translates it, 'It is eager to be at you'. We will never be free of sin's attentions in this life. . . . **but you must master it.** We can always be freed from it. This is a conversation that God holds with all of us right through our life on earth. Even to you and me today He says,

“Sin is trying to get you. Its desire is to have you, but you must master it.” It is a frightening thought, is it not? But notice who it is who is speaking – it is God Who says to us, “Beware of sin.” He is the One Who can master sin, and, with His help, we can overcome. The One who made us in the beginning, is the only One who can keep us safe from sin now and take us safe to heaven eventually.

Cain’s response is quite deliberate. If Eve was talked into sin by the snake, Cain will not have God talk him out of it. **Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.** (v 8).

If it was a deliberate sin, it was also an unconfessed sin. **Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”** (v 9)

Cain’s response mirrors chapter 3, verses 9 and 10: **But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”**

But Cain’s reply is much harder than Adam’s – a brazen lie – **“I do not know”** – followed by an impertinent witticism – “Shall I shepherd the shepherd? **Am I my brother’s keeper?**” There is no confession, just a denial of responsibility.

The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” (vv10-12)

The Lord had seen and the Lord had heard. The ground had to drink Abel’s blood and its response is to lock up its fruit from Cain and to refuse him its shelter.

“Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” (v. 10) Blood is always spilt blood in the Bible – speaking of violent death – and it always cries to God for action: either vengeance, like Abel’s, or mercy, like a different blood that ran down from the shaft of a spear and spurted out round nails driven into human flesh – the blood of Jesus, **the mediator of a new covenant** Whose **blood . . . speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel** (Hebrews 12:24).

Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”
(vv13, 14)

Notice there is no hint of penitence, contrition or repentance. Cain exaggerates in his guilt and fear – **“Whoever finds me will kill me.”** It is only remorse for the painful consequence for himself. It is self-pity, not true repentance. Perhaps that is why those in hell will weep as well as gnash their teeth, because they will be as full of self-pity as they are of anger.

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves how much real confession there is in us and how much self-pity at our continued sinfulness.

But the Lord said to him, “Not so, if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no-one who found him would kill him. (v. 15) We are not told what that mark was, but it was the utmost that mercy could do for the unrepentant.

4. Two different lines (vv. 16-26)

So Cain went out from the Lord’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. (v. 16)

And his race dwells there still, building cities –

Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch. (v. 17)

and amassing technical and artistic achievements –

Adah gave birth to Jabal; he was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all who play the harp and flute. Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron. Tubal-Cain's sister was Naamah. (vv. 20-22)

But they were secular and godless, epitomised by the violence and promiscuity of Lamech:

Lamech said to his wives, “Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.” (vv. 23, 24)

In contrast, there is another line established at the end of the chapter:

Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, say, “God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him.” Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord. (vv. 25, 26)

Seth is Abel's replacement and this is the start of the line that will eventually reach the One who will crush the serpent's head.

All of us belong to one or other of those two lines – the line of Cain or the line of Abel, characterised by our attitude to God: the attitudes we examined in verses 3 – 5. There are only two sorts of person – those who reckon to do God a favour (if they deign to acknowledge His existence at all); and those who seek God's favour and throw themselves on His mercy. There are only the righteous who

know themselves to be sinners, and sinners who think themselves righteous. And we are bound to ask ourselves to which line we ourselves belong. What are we trusting in our relationship to God? Self-reliance and self-confidence can slip back so easily into the Christian life. Having trusted in the gospel to save us, we must not look anywhere else to keep us going in our spiritual life – not to our Christian experience, our seniority, our status, our long record of church membership and church service. The Christian life is grace from beginning to end. It depends entirely on the unmerited favour of God. It is that which saves us and it is that which will see us through to the end. We can look foolish in spiritual terms when, having trusted Jesus to save us, we start to trust ourselves to maintain us. We can slip back from the line of Abel to the line of Cain.

The University of Oxford

**Sermon for The Feast of the Annunciation of Our Lord to The
Blessed Virgin Mary**

13 March 2005

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There are certain points in history which are pivotal. Times when everything changes, when the old ways, the old mores, are turned on their heads and a shaft of piercing light breaks through, throwing everything into relief. Making clear that nothing will ever be the same again. Luke begins his gospel with just such a moment, prefiguring God's cataclysmic world-shaking action as He breaks into history in the Incarnation.

We are here today to reflect upon the Annunciation, the announcement to Mary of that forthcoming birth. But that isn't the only annunciation at the beginning of Luke's gospel. The annunciation to Mary has been preceded by a parallel annunciation to an old priest taking his turn in the temple. In all likelihood making the incense offering for the salvation of Israel. Here is man who has spent his life waiting and praying for Yahweh to act in deliverance and salvation for his people. A man schooled in the Torah and the prophets. A man steeped in the covenant. A man who represented that covenant in his very being. Of the priestly order of Abijah, established by David; his wife, Elisabeth, was a descendant of Aaron the brother of Moses; the line chosen by God to provide the priests in the giving of the law.

And we are told that they are "righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord". What more could you ask for under the covenant? Surely here is a man with everything going for him?

You could hardly ask for someone more different from the subject of the second annunciation – Mary – a young woman and therefore with little education or formal knowledge, barely more than a girl, someone whose testimony would be of no value in a court of law. Hardly one of the establishment...and about to become an outcast.

And yet as they receive their annunciations something remarkable happens – the world is turned on its head.

Both are greeted by an angel. Zechariah, who is used to being in the sanctuary of the Lord, that holy place, is terrified and overwhelmed by fear; whereas Mary, little more than a child isn't terrified, more perplexed and confused at being greeted with the words usually reserved for a prophet. "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." Why would she be greeted in this way? It made no sense.

Both are childless, one because his wife is barren and they are now too old to have children and the other because she is young and has never slept with a man. Both are told that they will have a son. Zechariah, is told that his prayer has been answered – presumably his prayers for the salvation of Israel and the on-going prayers for himself and his wife Elisabeth. Zechariah simply cannot believe it – he is promised a child who will make ready a people prepared for the Lord. The angel gives him all the details, what the child will eat, how he will operate, what his calling will be, even how people will react to him. But Zechariah can't focus on that, schooled as he was in the Torah, in the stories of Hannah, Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah the priest, the representative par excellence of the covenant, can't believe it. He and Elisabeth are too old.

And so he asks, "How will I know this is so?" As if a pregnant wife would not be sign enough – or the word of God's messenger!

Compare this to Mary the young, vulnerable, unmarried uneducated girl, hearing the same message. She is to have a son – and what a son, one who will reign over the house of Jacob forever; he will be great and called the Son of the Most High and his name will be Jesus – the one who saves. There is no precedent for this – old or barren women have conceived before but not a virgin. If anyone had cause to doubt, if anyone had cause to challenge and ask, “How will I know this is so?” it is Mary.

But, in contrast, Mary, the young woman, responds in a totally different way. Hers is a response of anticipation. Hers is a question which, in contrast to Zechariah, assumes by its very construction that the remarkable promise will be fulfilled. The only question is how –

“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

Here is a young woman totally in tune with God, watching and praying, waiting for Him to act. And so when He does, when He chooses to use her to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah 7, foretelling the birth of a child, Immanuel – God with us – to a young woman, her response is not doubt but curiosity, expectation and ultimately total self-giving, holding nothing back, accepting unreservedly the calling which God lays on her despite all the hardship which inevitably went with it.

“Here I am, the servant, the slave, of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”.

In using the language of slavery, so often lost in our rather poetic “handmaid”, she was saying that she no longer belonged to herself, but to God, whatever that meant.

Mary can't have known then all the implications of accepting that vocation, but she would have been under no illusions that it would be easy. Unmarried girls who got themselves pregnant faced ostracism from their community at the least and death by stoning at the worst. When Mary surrendered her will to God she knowingly stepped out onto a rough road.

So two annunciations, two births promised into impossible situations and two totally contrasting responses, but not at all where one would expect.

And what are the consequences of their responses? Do they have implications? Does Luke want us to discover something about the purposes of God from what happens next?

The whole of these narratives are about speech. They are both annunciations – the declaration from God by his messenger Gabriel that He is about to do a new and world-changing thing. And so the consequences are also couched in terms of speech, not least ultimately in the birth of the Incarnate Word.

Zechariah, representative of the covenant, doubter of God's promise, is silenced. He is made mute, until the promised child is born.

Mary, on the other hand, the young woman without a husband, the woman whose testimony was valueless, is filled with the Holy Spirit and not only conceives, receiving God's incarnate Word within her, but is also given a voice. The angel's greeting was clearly appropriate because, when she visits Elisabeth, Mary far from being silent, is moved to prophecy.

Here, in what we know as the Magnificat, she speaks of God's generosity to her, of his saving grace for Israel in fulfilling his covenant promises. She sketches the way God turns the power structures of the world on their head and in so doing points supremely to the ministry of her son, the suffering servant.

In Mary and her acceptance of Gabriel's annunciation of Jesus' birth, God was doing a radically new thing. He was signalling that this was a pivotal point in history – a time for a new covenant, building on the old, fulfilling it but shaking it – taking for its transition not a priest of Abijah's line, schooled in the Torah, not the mighty and powerful, not the one allowed to offer prayers for the people. But a young woman, ready, waiting, listening, willing to submit herself entirely to God, who discovered that when we encounter God – when we are filled with the Holy Spirit – we are inevitably led to declaration. That God takes the weak to shame the strong.

Even Zechariah eventually discovered this prophetic gift after his son was born and he believed. He had been mute for at least nine months and must have been in a very vulnerable place, unable to take his proper place either in the community or the home. Yet it was out of that experience of weakness that he was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied in the words of the Benedictus which the Choir sang for us earlier. At last he got it – he saw at last the glorious purposes of God. The fulfilment of all the promises and of the covenant to Abraham. He saw at last that so much was being fulfilled and yet God was indeed doing a new thing – a new dawn was breaking on those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death.

This is Luke's pivotal moment prefiguring and giving the backdrop for so much of the rest of his gospel narrative.

Jesus himself is filled with the Spirit before he begins his preaching ministry – a ministry characterised by prophetic teaching and the ultimate sacrifice which changes history forever.

And Mary is once more present at the beginning of Luke's next book when the Spirit comes again at Pentecost, resulting in the gift of tongues and preaching,

gifts which lead many of the recipients to give themselves totally to God, often in martyrdom.

Too often Mary's value to us is seen to be as an example of passive acceptance and acquiescence, but she is much more than that. Mary is the first sign that the old covenant is being fulfilled and the new covenant is being ushered in. Far from being passive she is an active encouragement to be listening, watching, and waiting on God and to give ourselves unreservedly to Him, whatever the cost.

Expecting that, we discover, with Mary, the excitement of the God with whom, as Gabriel said, nothing is impossible, so we, like Mary, being filled with the Spirit, will be unable to keep quiet.

Questionnaire on the Use of the Bible in Preaching

1) Which parts of the Bible are being used? How much of the sermon is each part of the Bible influencing?

2) What kind of significance is being found in the text? Why?

3) Is the text the basis of what you are saying, or an illustration of it?

4) To what extent are you affirming or critiquing the text? Why?

5) What exegetical judgments have you made? Why?

6) Are you respecting the text as an ancient text – including its context, genre, and language?

7) Are you employing methods or tools of biblical criticism?

8) Where are you locating the meaning or significance of the text?

9) Are you being creative?

Questions for critiquing a sermon

How would you evaluate the sermon under the following headings?

Creativity

Relevance to congregation both collectively and individually

Relationship to the occasion (e.g. pastoral and liturgical context)

Engagement with scripture – and exegetical foundation

Structuring

Use of appropriate rhetorical techniques

Use of language

Use of illustrations/examples/stories – relevance to congregation, appropriateness to point, integration into the sermon

Use of voice (pace, volume, tone) and body (eye contact and body language)