

Sermon about Luke 1, 26-56 on 4th Advent 2021 in Brussels (IV)

Greeting: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come.

Bible: (26) In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, (27) to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. (28) And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!" (29) But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. (30) And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. (31) And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. (32) He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, (33) and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (34) And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (35) And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. (36) And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. (37) For nothing will be impossible with God."

(38) And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

(39) In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, (40) and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. (41) And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, (42) and she

exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! (43) And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (44) For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. (45) And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

(46) And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, (47) and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, (48) for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; (49) for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. (50) And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. (51) He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; (52) he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; (53) he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. (54) He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, (55) as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." (56) And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Prayer: Dear Lord and God, we ask you: prepare our hearts in this time of grace and make them a place for your Son that we may praise you joyfully. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. (Amen.)

Sermon: *An unexpected visit:* What do you do when the phone rings and the Pastor is on the line and announces that he wants to visit you or a colleague wants to say good-bye before Christmas holidays? I suppose we would all react in a similar way: First we would take a deep breath in silence, maybe even moan for a moment ("Mh, actually I am not up to this right now and I don't

have the time.") and then we would get down to the preparation: at least a rough tidy-up, if there is more time, a quick dusting, a snack ready, when the time comes, having a coffee ready and of course not wearing the old, worn jumper that still has the stains from the cooking on its belly.

Mary did not have the time. And then God came to visit. He practically just showed up at the door without short notice. Yes, actually not even that, but simply in the room - without knocking first. - What would we have thought at that moment? "Um, excuse me, but this is rather inappropriate right now?"

1. The situation: In most of the pictures of the last centuries that show the event we have just heard, a well-groomed, clean Mary sits or stands before the angel Gabriel and looks at him devotedly and expectantly. The picture we see here also shows this scene. It is a fresco from the middle of the 15th



century from Florence. Mary seems to have been literally waiting for the angel, there is nothing around her that she could have been preoccupied with just a moment ago. Nothing diverts her attention from the messenger of God.

The reality might have been very different: It is said that Mary was a young, still unmarried but engaged girl, Luther and our English Bible translate "virgin", who was betrothed to a man named Joseph. This fact means the following: Mary was probably only 13, 14 years old, at least not older than 15 or 16, and still lived at home with her parents. And she certainly did not sit lazily in the corner but worked hard in the household. Maybe she was busy preparing food or cleaning.

And in this situation, it happens: an angel, a messenger of God, stands by her and speaks to her: "Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!" - Mary had heard a lot about God, in the synagogue, from her parents, perhaps in the village, and we can assume that she was a devout Jewess who had often heard about God speaking directly to some chosen people in the very past, to Moses, the prophets and kings. And she also knew that the Messiah was supposed to come at some point, but whether she really expected it all the time? And now suddenly God speaks to her through his messenger! - How would you have reacted? Would you have been prepared for God?

2. The Reaction: It would be a absolutely normal reaction of people who experience something like this at first hand to be totally frightened, like the women at the open tomb, for example, or Zacharias, who is very afraid when he encounters an angel in the temple. Mary, however, reacts somewhat differently: the translation says "she was greatly troubled", but a little more accurate is: "she was very confused by this word and thought about it", she "pondered" about it. She keeps her mouth shut, she does not wave it off, nor does she get indignant, nor does she jump for joy. God speaks to her directly and Mary just listens - sure, when the first moment is over, she asks how it could be, but first she listens and ponders God's word. She "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." (Lk 2,19), as it says of her a little later, when she hears the words of the shepherds at the manger. And the real miracle of this incident comes to light in the last verse when it says: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." She lets it happen to her, she doesn't say no. What is she not saying no to? What is this that is being offered to her? God is bestowing his grace on her unconditionally. God has freely chosen her to become his instrument. There is no mention of any preconditions on Mary's part. "She is chosen by God's grace and

overflowing with it," says one Protestant commentator, and another adds: "It is not said that being chosen by God is an acknowledgement of her special values, of praiseworthy human qualities. Nor does being graced mean "being full of grace" - Mary, the vessel filled with grace; she has no grace to dispense, [as Roman Catholic doctrine says, but] she is graced. God graces whom he wills to grace - God's choice of grace has fallen upon her." She is to give birth to God's Son Jesus as a human being. A task that could not be more honourable. Now God still speaks directly into our world and announces himself, then, at Christmas he even comes into our world personally. But already here it becomes clear how God "lowers" to us, places himself at our eye level, yes, and if we consider God's history in Jesus Christ with us, even below that. This also becomes somewhat clear in our picture, when we see how the angel bows before Mary and looks into her eyes. But Mary, if she were sitting up straight, if she were looking at him from above, goes along with her head and her eyes. She arches her back just as humbly as the messenger. - How would we have looked towards the angel, and thus towards God? Would we even have recognised him as the One? If people always would meet this way, the world would look differently.

3. *The Perspective:* The angel was there, told God's word and disappeared. What is the perspective for Mary? For us? Without a doubt, the "Annunciation of Mary", as the story was titled in the church tradition, is quite an imposition. An imposition of God on Mary and, when we read and hear the story and paint it before our eyes, also again and again on us: a young girl, unmarried and thus without legal status of her own in an ancient culture, is predicted a pregnancy by God through an angel. (We will leave aside the fact that a greeting for a woman was completely unheard of at that time). Mary would have had every reason to weep, and if God had not helped Joseph later on, the story could

have ended badly. - But Mary can let it happen. Because when God asks us to do something, he also gives us the courage to do it and the strength to carry the task. And then new spaces of life open up. If we look at the picture, we can discover that the room in which Mary is sitting has no closed walls on at least two sides. Behind the angel there is a fenced, or "enclosed" garden. Behind Mary, on the other hand, there is only a tiny window that does not really fit into the architecture of the house. She looks forward to a new life that she could never have lived without God. She leaves her own limited one behind. - This new life will not be a romance and by human standards it will not have a happy ending. She will have to watch in pain how her first son, so wonderfully announced to her, will perish so painfully on the cross. Nevertheless, she will rejoice and look forward to this life full of hope, as it becomes clear a few verses further from her hymn of praise, the Magnificat. This happens solely out of faith and trust in our common God and Saviour, who masters our lives with us and for us. Mary listens and trusts in God's promise and can then go her way encouraged. - Mary is a special person through whom God enters our world at Christmas. But nevertheless, she is a person who we could also be, who, although much speaks against it, expects everything from God, trusting in the message of the angel. In this way, Mary is a model of faith. – Let us pray:

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, we ask you to let us, like Mary, listen to your word and thereby give us faith in you. Give us the courage and strength to receive you with expectation and readiness when you come to us and open up a life in your grace until then. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. (Amen.)

Blessing: And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.