

In the opening chapter of *Luke's Gospel* Zechariah and Mary both ask the question 'How?': 'How can I know this is true?', and 'How can this be?' There is, though, a deeper question which neither of them puts to Gabriel, and that question is, 'Why?' Not 'Why *me*?' Why Zechariah, Elizabeth or Mary? Not even 'Why *now*?' Why this particular place and time out of all the cosmos, the whole of history? The deeper question 'Why?' is this, 'Why's God actually doing this?' Or, in other words, 'Why are we here? What have we come together to celebrate? What's the good news, what's the purpose, the point, the meaning of the story *Luke* tells?'

When Christians try to answer *that* question 'Why?', we're often drawn into talking negatively: we talk about sin, about a fractured relationship with God, about disobedience and rebellion. God creates this world, but God's creatures turn away and fall. In the end there's a problem only God can solve by coming among us in person, from crib to cross, and by sharing our humanity bring us to share God's divinity. There are plenty of versions of that answer, expressed in varying language and in more, or often *less*, appealing imagery, but *all* the versions seem to assume the incarnation's effectively 'Plan B', a sad consequence of our sin.

Eight hundred years ago this coming October Francis of Assisi died. His followers then wrestled with his legacy. They tried to make theology out of the man Francis had been, and gradually they came to a very different answer to our question 'Why?'

The starting point was a deep sense of unease with the idea that the Incarnation was a 'Plan B', a consequence of human sin, caused by evil. For Francis, the Incarnation was an event of sheer beauty and joy, the one event in history which revealed the true nature of God and so defined the meaning of 'love'. But our usual answers to the question implied that, if there'd been no Fall, no sin, there would have been *no* Incarnation: God could have stayed with 'Plan A' and never shared our life, never learned to walk, never tasted food, never drunk wine, never danced, never laughed nor shed a tear nor felt the piercing pain of grief. And that would have left the word 'love' meaning nothing, or meaning anything we liked, and God would have stayed aloof, remote, unknown and even unknowable.

So Franciscans tried to frame a different answer. They came to argue that the Incarnation was the true 'Plan A', the *only* plan, sin or no sin, and sprang from the heart of God's creative love. And more, that it was God's humble sharing in creation's lived experience that was the real beginning of that creation. Though late in time, unless the Word became flesh nothing could have been brought into being at all, because the incarnate Word was the necessary pattern, the model, the template for it all. The Incarnation's effects rippled out through space and time, eternally, back and forth. There was this great paradox, this mystery, that it was only when Mary said her 'Yes' to God that the whole of creation truly came to be: when God's 'Let it be' *in* creation was echoed by an answering 'Let it be' *from* creation, then alone could the

cosmos be finished. And it followed that, because later she'd answer God's call to selfless service, then Mary herself could already have been born *fully human*, united fully with God. Sadly the Catholic tradition framed this understanding of Mary not with joy and delight but with more negativity, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, of Mary *without* stain of sin. But Franciscans have never been happy with such dreary language. Mary doesn't *lack sin*, she lacks *nothing*; she's *fully human*, fully *alive*, alive in a way no creature else has ever been, because no one else has ever been so intimate with God: no one else has been pregnant with God, no one else nourished God at her breast, nor changed God's nappies, nor helped God learn to walk and picked him up when *he* fell.

Faced with such thinking, words and logic can fail us, but there are other ways for faith to seek understanding. In Padova in northern Italy there's a chapel, standing on the site of an old Roman arena. It was built in the opening years of the fourteenth century, the design and decorative scheme by Giotto and Company. Now Giotto was a Franciscan. Not a friar, but a *Third Order* Franciscan. The chapel was dedicated to Mary, built as the focus for local celebrations of the Feast of the Annunciation. On the chancel wall, on either side of the arch framing the altar, Giotto placed figures of Gabriel and Mary, and the Franciscan understanding of the Incarnation is all there in those two frescoed figures.

First Gabriel. The archangel's kneeling; not *genuflecting*, but down on *both* knees. I don't know of any image of the

Annunciation before the time of Francis in which Gabriel kneels, generally the archangel stands; but from the later thirteenth century onwards a *kneeling* Gabriel, a Franciscan Gabriel, becomes common. An angel falls to their knees before a human being; heaven kneels to earth; God empties Godself in humble service and we see through Gabriel what Francis called the ‘littleness of God’. For Francis, Jesus shows us the truth that God is fundamentally love not power; that the essence of God is found in humble service, not in might set over us; and that God’s authority isn’t about constraint but about creativity, the source of life in all possible richness and delight. So Gabriel kneels, but also raises a hand in gracious blessing. The angel represents the God of the crib and the cross, and more: Gabriel points not just to what *Jesus* will be like, but to the eternal essence, nature and being of God the most Holy Trinity.

Facing Gabriel across the altar is Mary. We see first that Mary’s dressed *unexpectedly*, she’s *vested* for the liturgy. There are probably *two* reasons for that. The prosaic reason is that each Lady Day in the arena there was a mystery play, a dramatic presentation of the events *Luke* describes. Mary would have been played by a boy and so, since cross-dressing wasn’t a respectable thing back then, the boy would have been vested rather than made to wear a dress, and Giotto has caught that little bit of social history for us. But there is, I think, a deeper and more poetic reason. Francis called Mary ‘the girl made church’: she embodied God’s priestly people, she lives out the priesthood of all creation, offering God to the world

and giving voice and expression to all creatures in her response to God. So Mary's vocation is to show us her vocation, and ours, to be the Church. And *then* we notice that in her response to Gabriel Mary too is kneeling: she genuflects on one knee with her hands crossed over her breast: a visual 'Let it be'. Humble love meets loving humility; God's handmaid responds to God who is waiting on her; divine self-emptying is answered with a life poured freely out in sacrifice. And all this across an altar.

And it's around an altar that we gather today to celebrate *what?* Surely *not* some supposed Plan B, some contingent consequence of sin, but to celebrate a truth, *the* Truth who depends on nothing else, the beauty and breathtaking reality of God's love. And surely we meet not merely to tell the tale, to repeat the story of Mary's 'Yes', her mirroring of God's love, but to *embrace* her story and let it be our own; to kneel *with* her and meet again and then ourselves reflect the littleness of God in and through the sacrament of the altar; to try to live ourselves Mary's priestly affirmation of *fully* human life and so, by God's grace, become, with Mary, women and men made Church.