

Views from the Pews: The Annunciation

Of course we don't know the date on which the Angel Gabriel visited Mary, but because everyone in her day and ours knew it had to have been nine months before Christmas, the Church celebrates it on March 25, which falls on Friday of this week.

Think of the downright terror, for Mary facing a heavenly vision, trying to understand Gabriel's message and its impossible implications for her. The RSV says that 'she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be' (Luke 1:29), which seems like a massive understatement. No wonder she was comforted by Gabriel's suggestion that she could visit 'Elizabeth [who] in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' (Luke 1:36-37). That convinced her to overcome her fear in the immortal, trembling words we have remembered ever since: 'be it unto me according to your word' (v.38). God heaped more love on her by ensuring she could find the human comfort and understanding while she came to terms with an unimaginable future.

Still, that would not have removed the scarcely lesser terror, in that extremely conservative society, with which Mary and Joseph had to face the consequences of Mary's situation. They must have talked and wept and prayed and agonised together, day after day. For her, of the burning shame of being found pregnant whilst unmarried. For him, of being mocked and criticised by unsympathetic strangers. We seldom think of Joseph, struggling to reconcile his own fears of social disgrace with his compassion for Mary, pitched into an impossible moral dilemma.

So Joseph, 'being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly' (Matt 1:19). But,

just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife (Matt 1:20-24).

God thinks of everything.

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