

The Feast of the Annunciation

March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation, is one of the most engaging of all feasts in the Christian calendar. Its origin is in Luke's gospel, where, out of the blue, the angel Gabriel appears to an unknown young woman, Mary. Gabriel's message is breathtaking, to say the least! For 2,000 years now, we have pondered how Mary felt during and after her conversation with Gabriel, though the most important point is that, as a faithful young Jewish girl, she accepted the invitation offered by Gabriel. And artists have striven to capture this critical moment in salvation history on canvas. Of course, one of the challenges is to imagine what an angel looks like, and there have been endless variations to how angels are represented in Annunciation paintings. Yet there seems to have been less of a dilemma in how to portray an image of Mary. We have no idea of what she looked like, except that she was young and Jewish. The other thing we know from Luke's account is that **Mary was humble**, and that's what the recurring theme is in Annunciation art.

Despite Mary's humility, it has been common for artists to portray Gabriel in a slightly lower position than Mary, acknowledging Gabriel's appreciation of the extraordinary importance of the role Mary is about to undertake – to bear the Son of God. The image below, an icon from the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy in Saskatoon, has Gabriel looking up to Mary, as does the image by Fra Angelico on the next page. We might expect that an angel is the superior being – but not so!



Hail Mary, full of grace!

The Lord is with you.

Blessed are you among women and

Blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Image at right:
Hacker, 1892,
The Annunciation



The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Luke 1:26-33

For **Caroline Jones**, a highly respected ABC journalist who died last year, the Annunciation was a passage to ponder over and over again. In her autobiography, *An Authentic Life*, she wrote about the significance the Annunciation held for her:

(The Annunciation) offers an image of ‘the eternal’ breaking through into ordinary time, in the account of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she will bear the son of God. ... What a terrifying prospect for a modest young Jewish girl. ... For Christians, this is what each one is called to do – nothing less – to give birth in themselves to the son of God – that is, to become more like Jesus Christ. ... Of course, the prospect is as daunting to us today as it was to Mary. ...

In that critical moment of sacred time, Mary chose acceptance. In her trust in God, she risked the scandal of pregnancy before marriage in a community of strict religious law. It led her into a life of worry, rejection, loneliness, sacrifice, grief and apparent failure. But it was also a life of love and absolute commitment. And it bore fruit that would nourish people down the ages. Against all appearances at the time, hers was a supremely successful life. ...

How can a story from 2000 years ago sustain a modern woman in the very different world of the 20th century? ... At a time of difficult challenge, I ponder Mary’s story, let it seep into my consciousness. I have a print of Fra Angelico’s painting of the Annunciation above my desk (*see image below*), given to me by a thoughtful young friend. It was an exquisite gesture of friendship. As I work at my desk, Max’s gift of **Mary is there beside me, her slight body curved in apprehension as she accepts her destiny. She is making an act of faith in life and in her God, taking a trusting step into the unknown.**

Caroline Jones AO, *An Authentic Life*, ABC Books, 2005, Pp. 123-4

Her prudence wrestled with the
Dove
To hide us in his cloud of steel and
silver:
These are the mysteries of her Son.
And here my heart, a purchased
outlaw,
Prays in her possession
Until her Jesus, makes my heart
Smile like a flower in her
blameless hand.

Thomas Merton, *The Annunciation*
(excerpt)



Ponder times in your life where an invitation or opportunity has come to you out of the blue, and has had consequences beyond what you could foresee at the time. How did you respond? Did you sense this might be God’s way of guiding you to something you might otherwise not have encountered?

