



21 August 2021

Annunciation (Luke 1. 26-38)

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Annunciation

Even if I don't see it again—nor ever feel it
I know it is—and that if once it hailed me
it ever does—

And so it is myself I want to turn in that direction
not as towards a place, but it was a tilting
within myself,

as one turns a mirror to flash the light to where
it isn't—I was blinded like that—and swam
in what shone at me

only able to endure it by being no one and
so specifically myself I thought I'd die
from being loved like that.

Marie Howe in *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*

Sometimes it helps to go back to the beginning. I don't just mean the beginning of the story of Jesus' life, the tale of his conception by his mother, Mary, in accordance with the word of God. I mean the beginning of everything – getting in touch once again with the essential dynamic of our faith, which is grounded in the dynamic of life itself, in the mystery of call and response.

If we hadn't been celebrating the feast of Mary today, we would have been reading the final section of chapter 6 of John's gospel, the bread of life discourse which Frances has been reflecting on so beautifully over the past two weeks. You might recall that many of those who heard Jesus' words in this discourse have been offended by them. His claim that 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them' caused major consternation and because of this, John writes, 'many of his disciples turned back, and no longer went about with him' (6. 66). Jesus asks the twelve apostles if they too want to go away, but Peter rises magnificently to the occasion: 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have

come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God'. Jesus responds in turn, 'Did I not choose you, the twelve?'

The theme of call and response is pervasive in Scripture. From the stories of Abraham to Moses, Isaiah to Jeremiah, and Mary to the apostles, God is depicted as addressing human beings and asking for our response. St Paul understands this divine call to be at the foundation of life itself. God, he writes, 'calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Romans 4.17). The French philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien has offered some exquisite reflections on this theme. He suggests that if God's call is what brings us into existence, then our first response is simply to be here. 'The first vocation [or call] is the vocation to be, the first answer, to be there. We have always, already answered our summons', Chrétien writes.¹ Whatever happens next, whatever we do with our lives, we're already a 'yes'. Says Chrétien: 'Simply through the fact of our being' we are a "'here I am'" which has been provoked by God's "'come here"' .²

Isn't this a beautiful and profound way of imagining human being – as a response? Part of what it suggests is that, if I am constituted by the call of God, then I am never not addressed, never not being called forth. And this resonates with the opening lines of Marie Howe's extraordinary poem, 'Annunciation'.³

'Even if I don't see it again – nor ever feel it
I know it is – and that if once it hailed me
it ever does –'

This way of imagining human being also suggests that there is no 'me' that exists apart from the call. It's not that I existed first and then responded; rather, my being here is my response. Chrétien cites Swiss theologian John Calvin, who insists that 'the call, at whatever moment that it is heard, is always a call that draws out of

¹ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p.18.

² Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, p.18.

³ Published in *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), p.43.

nothingness'.⁴ God 'addresses what in [us] is not'.⁵ And if this is true for the call that initiates my existence, perhaps the same holds for any 'call' from God that I might subsequently hear.

Marie Howe imagines Mary describing her experience of annunciation like that. The self she turns towards God, that responds to being 'hailed', is not a solid entity, full of its own nature. Rather, according to the poem, it's a tilting within, 'as one turns a mirror', and the light is flashed 'to where it isn't'. In other words, we are not called – into life or into a specific vocation – because of what we already are, because of how special or deserving or useful. It's in our 'nothingness', or as the tradition has always said of Mary, in her humility and poverty of spirit, that the Word of God resounds and bears fruit. And there are many other stories in Scripture that resonate here – think of Moses and Jeremiah protesting their call to be prophets because they can't speak; Sarah and Elizabeth assuming they can't be mothers, because they're too old. Again and again in Scripture, God addresses, God calls forth what in us is not or not yet.

Chrétien refers to the 17th century French mystic, Pierre Bérulle, saying that just as the soul is drawn out of nothingness into existence at creation, it is as we are brought to or consent to be 'nothing' that we become 'a pure capacity for God'.⁶ The light of God shines where it isn't, Howe imagines Mary saying. And when she is tilted towards it, when it flashes in the mirror within, 'I was blinded ... and swam in what shone at me/ only able to endure it by being no one'. And yet, it's not that Mary herself is annihilated. Paradoxically, the more she gives room and opens herself to God, the more she becomes herself: 'so specifically myself I thought I'd die/ from being loved like that'.

Sometimes, I said, it helps to go back to the beginning. So let me share what I find helpful about being reminded of this mysterious dynamic of call and response discerned at the heart of things.

⁴ Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, p.21.

⁵ Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, p.22.

⁶ Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, p.22.

For one thing, I love the sense that what matters most is human being is our openness to call – a stance of continuous receptivity, responsivity, a listening. The sense that who we really are and will be lies just beyond us: ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed’, writes John (1 John 3.2). This stance of openness and receptivity doesn’t mean refusing to settle to the responsibilities and commitments in front of us – as if we’re always waiting for life to begin or for something more exciting to happen. It’s more about being present, in the midst of ordinary life, to the unfinished quality, to the as yet unrealised possibilities of our existence. Chrétien says that if the call comes to us from before the creation of the world, then it is an eternal call and by definition we cannot answer it wholly. There’s an ‘excess’ (French philosophers love that word!) – and this excess draws me into ever deeper listening, the desire to respond and give myself ever more whole-heartedly; it’s this that stops me becoming closed in on myself, trapped in complacency and the illusion of self-sufficiency.

I know that for some, this whole language of ‘call and response’ can feel alienating. We might not feel we’ve ever been addressed by anything we’d want to call ‘God’, or that we’ve responded to such an eternal call. For many of us, it seems, there are no angels, no flashes of light – we’re just doing our best in the life we’ve somehow ended up with. And yet, I imagine most of us have been conscious at times of sheer yearning – not for particular things, but for *something*. Fuller life, truth, beauty, meaning, love. In another poem, Marie Howe writes of ‘*that yearning*’,⁷ that sense of incompleteness which, according to Zen teacher John Tarrant, ‘is the opening where love appears’.⁸ St Augustine understood that *that yearning*, that desire which cannot be quenched by the things of this world, is the call of God in us. And it’s that yearning which draws us again and again back to humility, poverty, simplicity ... the refusal to fill the space, the need, the emptiness with anything that

⁷ Marie Howe, ‘What the Living Do’, in Roger Housden, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life Again & Again* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007).

⁸ Cited in Housden’s discussion of Howe’s poem, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life Again & Again*, p.74.

is not God. And the more I am able to abide here, the more I begin to realise the mystery of the response that I am and the more God grows in me.

I've been conscious that, in a week that's seen the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, amid the harrowing images and stories and our nation's apparent failure to respond in any way commensurate with our obligations, a poetic reflection on our personal responsiveness to God may seem indulgent – a first-world issue, a luxury unavailable to those battling for sheer survival.

But what else are we to do? To whom else can we go? How else can we be of service, if not by receiving the gift of our being, responding to the summons that is our life, and then opening ourselves again in ever deeper listening – in the prayer that like Mary and like her Son, the fruit of our responsiveness may be for the life of the world.