

THE ANNUNCIATION

Students of Holy Scripture have always been puzzled by the message which the Angel Gabriel delivered to Mary at the Annunciation. They have asked the question : ' Did the angel intend to tell Our Lady that, in addition to her virginal conception of Jesus, she would also be the Mother of God in the strict sense of the word ? ' They ask this question because there are indications that Mary did not seem aware of this divine sonship of her son. Certainly the incident of the Finding in the Temple would seem to bear this out : ' And he said to them, " How is it that ye sought me ? Knew ye not that I must needs be in my Father's house ? " ' And they understood not the word which he spoke to them ' (Luke 2:49-50). In addition to that incident there is also the Annunciation narrative itself which seems to give no more than a messianic motherhood without necessarily implying the Messiah to be the Son of God in the strict sense.

While the account leaves no doubt as to the supernatural conception of Jesus, it cannot be admitted that this is sufficient to establish his divinity. Have we therefore arrived at an impasse ? Do we have to say that, from an examination of the text alone, we can only suppose that the revelation to Our Lady was gradual and that she arrived at the full knowledge of her divine motherhood only after the incident of the Finding in the Temple ? Or does the text itself provide a solution to the problem ?

The whole of chapters one and two of St Luke's gospel (with the exception of the first four verses) is built up into an organic unity. Some scholars¹ see a definite literary form in these chapters—suffused with semitic colouring—in which strict parallels are to be found between the Annunciations to Zachary and to Our Lady and between the Births of St John the Baptist and of Our Lord, and linking up these accounts are ' refrains ' or themes which make up the whole into a definite pattern. Thus we read, ' And the child grew and was strengthened in spirit ' (1:80) ; the words appear again in 2:40 and in a slightly modified form in 2:51.

And again, the words ' But Mary stored up all these things in her heart and pondered them ' (2:19 and 51), together with other themes placed in definite places, do indicate a literary structure. The purpose of this structure is to focus attention on the principal subject—Jesus and his Mother. Or putting it another way, there seems to be a

¹ cf. S. Lyonnet, s.j. ' Le récit de l'Annonciation et la Maternité divine de la S. Vierge, ' *Ami du Clergé* LXVI (1956), pp. 33-46

THE ANNUNCIATION

spiritual progression which leads to Our Lord and his Mother as its climax. If the structure has been built up so carefully it must have been for a reason, and if we analyse it carefully it may provide the answer to our original question 'Did Mary know that she was to be the Mother of God from the message of the Angel?'

This literary structure would seem to link up with the Old Testament. It tells us that Mary received a message which evoked for her many episodes in the history of her people: certain words recall significant happenings in the work of God for His people. Later she was to know what had befallen Zachary and Elizabeth. Once she had heard their story she could more easily piece together the experiences she had undergone, the sum total of which we now have written down for us in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. We learn that God had sent His angel to prepare for His coming in the person of St John the Baptist. St John through his Nazarite vow had as his spiritual forebears Samson and Samuel who had played decisive roles in the history of their nation. The moral and spiritual progression of the history of Israel can be traced in these personalities, and in John it had reached a point only to be surpassed in Our Lord. From Samson to Samuel, from John to Jesus are steps in the spiritual history of the Israelites. Is this spiritual progression leading up to the Messiah a preparation for an earthly deliverer or someone greater? The words addressed by Gabriel to Our Lady seem to supply the answer.

The first word with which the Angel greets Mary is 'Hail' (Ave!). But is this to be taken only as a normal greeting? True, the Greek word *Chairé* could be a translation of the Hebrew expression *Shalomlak* meaning 'peace be to you'—the ordinary form of greeting for the Semites. But is this merely to be translated by the word 'Hail'? An examination of the Old Testament shows us there are four texts in which this expression *Chairé* is used and in each case to introduce a messianic message! (Soph. 3:14-17; Joel 2:21, 23; Zach. 9:9-17).

Thus the Prophet Sophonias:

Rejoice, daughter of Zion!
Cry out daughter of Israel!
The Lord is King of Israel in the midst of thee . . .
In that day, the Lord will say to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, Zion . . .
The Lord thy God is in the midst of thee,
The Mighty One will save thee. (3:14, 15b, 16)

The Prophet Joel:

Do not fear, land (of Israel) and rejoice
Because the Lord has done wonderful things
to thee; (words of the Magnificat).

THE ANNUNCIATION

And Children of Zion *rejoice* . . .
And you shall know that it is *I who am in the*
midst of you, Israel,
I who am Yahweh your God. (2:21, 23, 27)

The Prophet Zacharias :

Rejoice exceedingly daughter of Zion,
Cry out for joy, daughter of Jerusalem
Behold your King will come, Just and a Saviour. (9:9)

This is surely the meaning intended by St Luke in his gospel ; not any conventional greeting but a special messianic one would have come from the angel. Another reason for suggesting this, is that on each of the four occasions the greeting is used, it is linked up with two other expressions—‘do not fear’ and Yahweh coming in the midst of His people. We find just these expressions in the Annunciation to Mary. ‘Rejoice . . .,’ ‘the Lord is with thee . . .,’ ‘do not fear.’ Surely Mary would have recognised this call of the prophets and now God’s presence is already being indicated in the words ‘the Lord is with thee.’ God is coming to His people in a way they had never dreamt, by taking on human nature and coming in the midst of His people by the acceptance of this humble virgin. In her humility Our Lady showed signs of distress at these words, so the Angel continues, ‘do not fear, . . .’ And the Angel went on to tell Mary that she would conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Jesus.

Our Lady at least had reason to suspect something special about the son she was called upon to bear. These messianic expressions of the prophets with the implication of God coming among his people were now augmented by well-known messianic titles. The Angel tells her that Jesus is heir to David’s throne ; his reign shall have no end ; he is the Son of the Most High. But from the titles alone no more can be deduced than a sonship of God in the wide sense, just as David is said to have God for his Father ; or as Adam is called son of God since he had God for his Father. Therefore can we not say that *this* is a gradual preparation or unfolding for the full revelation of the divine motherhood of Mary ? Step by step the Angel is leading her on to the fullness of the truth, but so gently in order to avoid overwhelming her. We do not know what Mary thought ; the text does not tell us. But on account of what the text tells us we can suggest that the message she received was sufficient to make her realise, or at least suspect her divine maternity. But here a difficulty arises for her : she did not doubt the truth of the Angel’s message like Zachary, but she did ask for some information to which she felt she had a right, since she had taken a vow of virginity. Therefore Our Lady put her

problem to the Angel—'How shall this be, seeing that I know not man?'

The moment for the final and full revelation has arrived. In v. 35 seems to lie the answer to the problem. The information which Mary received from the Angel seems to us to be sufficient to suppose that she could have arrived at the conclusion of her divine maternity. Once again we presume that Mary was well versed in the Scriptures and that these words, pregnant with meaning, left no doubt in her mind. The Angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee' (v. 35a). Mary knew that in the past history of her people the Spirit of the Lord had come upon certain persons who had been chosen by God for a particular mission. She knew also that the Messiah would receive the Spirit of the Lord in a special way. The Emmanuel, 'God with us,' of Isaias would carry out a spiritual mission of the highest order and the spirit of holiness would enable him to do this. This Spirit of the Lord was to come not only on the Messiah but on the whole messianic community.

And you shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezech. 36:38 ; cf. Apoc. 21:7)

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel, after those days, saith the Lord: . . . I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer. 31:33)

But in what sense will the Holy Spirit come upon Mary? The second part of the verse, parallel to the first, helps to explain this. 'And the might of the Most High will overshadow you' (v. 35b). According to the Hebrew parallelism, the context shows that the 'might of the Most High' must refer to the Holy Spirit, that is God Himself. The Greek verb *episkiasei* is translated literally 'will overshadow you.' But the same Greek verb *episkiazein* elsewhere appears in a very different sense, and one which is specially suited to the context of the Annunciation. In Exod. 40:34 we have the word *shakan*, meaning 'to dwell.' This word has a deeply religious significance in Israel, especially when used in the form (*pi''el*) which gives the technical meaning of 'to make the divine name to dwell.' This is a reference to the divine dwelling-place, and hence the noun *hammishkan*, translated in the LXX by the word *skēnē*, a tent. This latter word, be it noted, is composed of the same consonants, *s-k-n* as the Hebrew word. Later Judaism developed the notion of divine dwelling-place or *Shekinah* until the word became one of the customary substitutes for the name Yahweh. In Exodus we are told that the divine dwelling-place or tabernacle was set up by Moses and Aaron, and 'the cloud covered it with its shadow.' For the Israelites, God was transcendent even when He condescended to visit His people. No-one can see Him

and escape death, and His dwelling-place on earth was 'taboo' in a special way. The high priest himself was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies only once a year, and only then through a cloud of incense :

The Lord spoke to Moses giving him a message for his brother Aaron : he must never present himself without due preparation within the sanctuary, behind the veil, where the throne stands above the ark. If he does so, the penalty is death ; it is over this shrine that I mean to reveal Myself in cloud. And now, filling his censer with coals from the altar, and taking a handful of beaten spices for incense, he will pass beyond the veil into the inner sanctuary, putting incense on the coal, so that a cloud of smoke may hide that shrine over the ark, which none may see and live. (Lev. 16:2, 12-13)

This cloud is a favourite symbol of God's presence with the Israelites, a cloud in which 'they saw the glory of the Lord revealed to them whilst in the desert' (Exod. 16:10). It was in a dense cloud that Yahweh came near to Moses (Exod. 19:9ff.), 'So that (said God) all the people will listen when I speak to you and will also have faith in you from henceforth.' Similarly a cloud overshadowed the three Apostles who were privileged to be present on Mount Tabor at the Transfiguration (cf. Luke 9:34-5). On two other occasions in the LXX the same verb is used but not in the composite form, simply *skiazēin epi*, but always in the same context—to show the presence of the cloud above the tabernacle. Both occasions occur in Num. 9:15ff., in which the writer tells how God led His people by means of this cloud into the desert from the shores of the Dead Sea to the borders of the Promised Land. From all this, one can grasp just how important this cloud was to the Israelites. It covered the tabernacle where God's dwelling-place was. Another significant parallel is the 'glory of Yahweh' which indicated God's active presence : 'then a cloud covered the tabernacle of testimony, and the *Glory of the Lord* filled the dwelling-place (*skēnē*)' (Exod. 40:32). Moses could not enter the tabernacle because of this cloud above it and the Glory of Yahweh within. Two parallel and equivalent statements to express this mysterious Divine presence.

What therefore does the Angel's message mean to Mary ? In effect he is saying that the Divine Presence which had in the past always resided above the tabernacle and filled the divine place, so that even Moses was not allowed to enter it, and later the Temple, in the most secret part, the Holy of Holies, was now going to make its dwelling-place in her womb. Now this Divine Presence is actualised in her, making her a 'Holy of Holies' which no living man can approach. God's presence made her the most sacred dwelling He had ever had on earth, for once a year the high priest entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple. If such is the idea hidden behind the expression

'will overshadow thee,' then the Angel's announcement presents no difficulty nor does his next statement: 'Therefore the Holy one to be begotten shall be called the Son of God.' It is stating the consequence of God's presence in Mary, and according to the semitic way of speaking, the name given defines the nature of the person, i.e. God's son by nature. If Mary's womb is now to be the Temple of God and the Holy of Holies, it stands to reason that the child to be born of her will be 'holy'—holiness being proper to God; not a holiness similar to Samson, Samuel or even John the Baptist, but a unique holiness arising from the unique presence of God Himself in the virgin mother's womb. His real name will be 'holy,' i.e. his nature and essence, and in the Gospel he will be addressed by this title. The man with the unclean spirit cries out: 'We know who you are, Holy One of God' (Mark 1:24). St Peter likewise says: 'We have come to believe and know that thou art the Holy One of God' (John 6:68-9).

In the case of St Peter and the demons, the meaning of the expression 'Holy One of God' cannot be proved to go beyond a purely messianic one, but for Mary there is no doubt, since Gabriel adds to 'Holy One,' the words 'the Son of God.' We must always remember that the formula on its own is not sufficient, but taken now in this new context, its meaning does seem to indicate not merely some superhuman being but God. Taking the whole message together it seems that Mary could receive no other meaning from it but this, and therefore understood that she was to be the mother of God in the strict sense of the words.

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