

## The 66th Annual Pilgrimage of Our Lady of Walsingham

A Meditation at a Service for Noonday, 12.00 noon 12 October 2018  
by The Rev'd C J Arnold, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, Oshkosh

### Meditation 1: The words of Mary at the Annunciation

#### ~ The Six Words of the Virgin Mary ~

In 17th century Peru, a Jesuit priest preached on the seven last words of Christ on the Cross. It has become a popular thing to do on Good Friday, not only in Jesuit and Roman Catholic churches, but in Anglican, and Lutheran churches, and in other places.

I decided to look up all the times when our Lady Saint Mary speaks in the Gospels. I desperately wanted to bring to you the seven words of our Lady Saint Mary. Alas, she is only quoted six times. There are times when we are told she says things, but we are not told what she says, and so those I think do not count. So six it is. Seven is a more satisfying sort of Biblical number, but there is nothing to be done about it. Six words is what we have. We shall focus on quality over quantity. Or maybe the seventh word of Mary is the one she spoke to the Lady Richeldis of Faverches in 1061, or to St. Dominic in 1208, or the English Carmelite St. Simon Stock in the 13th century, or St. Juan Diego, or to you today. Six words recorded in Scripture, and the seventh echoing down through the ages.

Perhaps. I leave that to you.

#### ~ The first and second Words of Our Lady: The Annunciation ~

At this hour of noon, we will consider the first two times that she speaks. This happens when the Archangel St. Gabriel visits her, in the event which we have come to know as the Annunciation. Here are the two quotes in question: "How can this be, since I am a virgin." and "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

It is right to begin here, of course, with the Annunciation. Tomorrow I will remind you of the full story of Walsingham, but the heart of the message that our Lady Saint Mary gave in her appearing was that she desired to share her joy with the Lady Richeldis, and with England, and not simply her joy generally, but the joy of the Annunciation.

If the Greeks catholics are drawn to the Resurrection, and Latin catholics are drawn to the Crucifixion, English catholics have ever been drawn towards the Incarnation. We are a Christmas people, we whose heritage is so steeped like the best tea in the English faith.

How can this be, since I am a virgin. Gabriel had finished the executive summary of Operation Incarnation when Mary began raising all the right questions. She was shrewd, was Mary. She knew what Gabriel was talking about, and she knew how the basic biology worked. She knows better than many people do today that pregnancy requires sex and she hasn't done that.

Let's be blunt about it. The whole of this Christianity thing requires us to be far more blunt about things than we usually are these days. Our medieval ancestors knew what we have forgotten: that Christ has redeemed every bit of humanity, and he's done so with and through blood and flesh, the virgin's womb and the spear-pierced side, and the flesh and blood of the sacrament.

Let us be adults about all of this. Mary knew what Gabriel was talking about, and so do we.

But for all the things that Gabriel throws at her, the prophecy of a pregnancy and a gender and a name and a destiny, and a great destiny — David's throne, and an endless rule over Jacob's descendants — for all these bizarre words, coming from the sudden and terrifying appearance of an actual angel from out of nowhere, what is the one thing that Mary zeroes in on? The pragmatic. Grand and golden and glorious is your promise, O Archangel Gabriel the one who speaks for the Most High, but there is a flaw in your story: Can't get pregnant, haven't had sex.

Gabriel explains, and we know this story well by now. We hear it every March 25th, if we're blessed to be in a parish that celebrates the feast of the Annunciation, and if we're blessed enough to attend it. We hear it again in Advent, as well, of course. We sit in awe as we witness the whole amazing exchange between this angel and this woman. And maybe you're like me, whenever you hear this story again, I always draw in my breath in anticipation, like that kind of anticipation when the lights go down right before the curtain goes up on a play you've been waiting a long time to see. That kind of pregnant pause? You know? Right before Mary says what are perhaps the most important 17 words in all of history

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Luke 1:38

Oh, doesn't the heart soar to hear those words? Is this not the entirety of Christian life in a nutshell? Should we not weave this word of our Lady Mary's into our Sunday liturgy somehow? Think about that, where would you nestle this brave word into the liturgy? Or into your life? What if it was the first thing you said in the morning, when you rise to say your prayers? What if you were to kneel before this altar, or before the crucifix, and to say those words?

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

She says it, and the Incarnation begins. This is where it starts. Christmas is well and good. Profound indeed is the first verse of one of my favorite carols

O little town of Bethlehem  
How still we see thee lie  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The everlasting Light

The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight

Our Lord needs a birthday, and he needs his own body and his own independence, which is a thing we shall touch upon this afternoon. But the Incarnation begins not in the little town of Bethlehem, but in Nazareth. Here is where it begins, just Christ, and Mary, and Gabriel, and God. Jesus begins here, veiled in whispers, an intimate secret that Mary pondered in her heart as Christ took form in her womb.

Let it be with me according to your word, she said to Gabriel, but it wasn't Gabriel's word that changed things. It was hers. Her word, her yes, enfleshed the Word, enfolded in her own flesh, and the whole of this salvation story was set on its way. Christmas is when Jesus was born, but the Annunciation is where Jesus begins.

Our Lady of Walsingham, show us always the joy of the annunciation, and pray for us.  
Amen.