**Sermon Luke 1:26-38**

**Including Cantata**

**„Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern“, BWV 1**

**Annunciation of our Lord**

**St. Johns Southgate Melbourne**

**26. März 2017**

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750, Thomaskantor 1723-1750)

How lovely shines the morning star

Cantata for The Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, BWV 1

*26* *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,* *27* *to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary.* *28* *And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”* *29* *But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.* *30* *And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.* *31* *And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.* *32* *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 father David,* *33* *and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end* *34* *And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”* *35* *And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.* *36* *And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.* *37* *For nothing will be impossible with God.”* *38* *And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant6 of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.*

Luke 1:26-38

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

It has become unfashionable: this feast day on which we remember the annunciation of the Lord’s birth, nine months before Christmas. Not just because the 25th of March is usually right in the middle of the Passiontide. Rather many Protestant Christians still believe that celebrating a feast day of Mary is a purely Catholic thing. However, the Reformers never intended to abolish these feast days. So we have to remember, especially in the year of the Reformation anniversary, that many traditions still remain a part of Lutheran identity. The Protestant Church did not come into existence in 1517. The time before is part of our history. It has not been erased by Martin Luther. And, of course, Johann Sebastian Bach had to deliver cantatas for the feast days of Mary – even in the musically sparse Passiontide.

That is as good a reason as any to consider some unfashionable thoughts this morning. But to have unfashionable thoughts and beliefs doesn’t mean to have fallen out of time. No: in most cases it means being ahead of your time. So we as Christians should be glad and grateful about a faith that is looking towards the future. The story of the annunciation of Mary’s pregnancy by the angel Gabriel is about things to come. It is a tale between the conflicting poles of hope for justice on one hand and the imposing reality of humiliation and neglect on the other; which is exactly where many people today find themselves facing a great challenge: between hope for recovery and the reality of a fatal disease. Between hope for peace and the reality of weapon trades and war.

The evangelist Luke tells of a Jewish girl receiving the announcement of the illegitimate conception of her first child. Mary is clueless. She is engaged to a man, Joseph of the house of David – which is to say: a man with a traditional mindset and social rooting. But as his fiancée Mary isn’t yet a part of his family. So she could under no circumstances think of offspring – let alone get involved with Joseph. However, the terror that overcomes Mary starts even before the announcement of her pregnancy. She literally flinches when she is addressed by the angel:

*Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!*

Unsettled she asks

*what sort of greeting might this be*

Why is she, a simple woman, being address in such a wondrous way? Why does the angel Gabriel suddenly pick this woman, who has nothing to show for herself? Why does the angel call her out of her insignificance? Why does he respect her, honour her? Why this exchange of roles? It is not the man Joseph, a descendant of David, is addressed in this divine annunciation, but a woman who isn’t even his wife at the time. That is more than surprising and breaks all social conventions.

*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.*

Thus the angel reveals to Mary the things to come.

This annunciation confuses Mary:

*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*

she replies in surprise. The question is less of a biological nature than it is pertaining to Mary’s social status: how can I, the young woman, the virgin who hasn’t been accepted into the family of Joseph yet, become the Messiah’s mother and thereby the bearer of Israel’s promise? How could the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi with his strategy of non-violence live such a convincing example of the basic principles of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount? How can a woman of Turkish descent become the host of a popular news programme in Germany? How can a boy from an atheist background be in St. Thomas Boys Choir? Indeed, we won’t recognize what’s truly miraculous about Mary’s pregnancy and the birth of Jesus until we let go of the biological question of a virgin birth and its mystically dogmatic elevation in Catholicism. Interestingly enough, this question doesn’t figure at all in the cantata “*How lovely shines the morning star”*. The extraordinary, the unthinkable lies in a different fact: a simple girl of the people, this Mary, is called by God to be the mother of the Messiah and thereby freed from her tight social restrictions. God doesn’t make everlasting definitions of the sort: once a pauper, always a pauper; once a criminal, always a criminal; once a failuer, always a failuer.

This has far reaching implications for the Messiah. God doesn’t just become human through Jesus but by becoming human He also connects with the people at the very bottom and highlights their divine dignity, which is often enough trampled on in every day life. With Mary, God makes a woman the mother of the Son of Man, who is lifted out of the dust of disregard. At first, this elevation of the low doesn’t really fit the world of him who

*will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*

And neither do the shepherds who later become the first witnesses to the son of God’s birth. This idea of a misfit is noticeable in Luke’s account from the beginning and foreshadows Jesus’ later path, when he turns to the outcast, the sinners and the publicans. He’s not heading for the palaces but the streets and cottages to do his work. This emphasizes that the Messiah is coming from down below to push the ones on top from their pretentious thrones. The new reign of God, which the Messiah is meant to raise, doesn’t continue the old power structure but rather topples it. The world is freed from the spirit of servitude and re-structured.

How can a woman, who hasn’t been asked or trusted to do anything so far, deal with an announcement of this magnitude? How can she manage not to fail at this overwhelming responsibility? The angel Gabriel says to Mary:

*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; … For nothing will be impossible with God.*

That’s the key: a miracle happens here, the miracle of a revolutionary transformation:

*For nothing will be impossible with God.*

With the language of miracles, God seeks to free Mary and free us from the prison of a pure fetishism for reality. The spirit of God enables us to understand this language, and the shadow of the Most High allows us to endure the contradictions of our earthly life. As nothing is impossible with God, everything changes – even things that seem unchangeable. This already became apparent with Elizabeth, an aged relative of Mary’s: she became pregnant in her old age and, half a year before Jesus was born, gave birth to John, who later received the surname *“the Baptist”*. Nobody could have expected this birth. Even the old priest Zechariah, husband of Elizabeth, didn’t want to believe the prediction of John’s birth – and yet it did happen. No one anticipated Jesus’ birth, God becoming human – and yet it did happen. Nobody could have known that Saul, the religious fundamentalist, would turn into Paul, the first theologist – and yet this transformation did take place outside of Damascus. Nobody had planned the Peaceful Revolution of 1989 – and yet it was successful and freed the people from dictatorship and patronization.

Now we can understand even better why Johann Sebastian Bach doesn’t even begin to reflect on the virgin birth but rather turns the whole cantata into a glorification of God’s miracles. Everything is transformed, everything shines in a new light, for nothing is impossible with God. As the tenor recitative suggests: through the bread of heaven we can overcome grave, danger and death, lifelessness, a vegetative state, mere functioning, and by chewing the bread here on Earth we can already taste “*the heavenly delight”* mentioned in the soprano aria. Like the bread of the Holy Communion transforms as we chew it, the circumstances of our reality transform, as well. The unbearable, the unpalatable, the indigestible becomes palatable – and not in the sense that we settle for it or sugarcoat the facts. Instead they really change: those that have been cast aside become “*the chosen”* (as in the tenor recitative).

What else can Mary answer to this announcement other than:

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

That’s Mary speaking as the woman that she is: looking forward to the new life growing inside her, despite the difficult circumstances. However, it is one thing to accept an unwanted pregnancy full of hope – as the soprano aria so gracefully expresses:

*Fill utterly, you divine celestial flames,
This faithful breast that longs for you!*

It is quite another thing to deal with the challenges that Mary will have to face with Jesus growing up. The tension starts to build when Jesus at the age of 12, a pubescent boy in Jerusalem, pulls away from his parents to emancipate himself. And it continues when Jesus is expelled from Nazareth because of his proclamation and attention to those who have gone astray and he harshly breaks with his family. Jesus goes so far as to deny his mother and hurl at the people:

*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.*

Luke 8:21

Finally, Mary is disappointed beyond all words when Jesus has to die the lonely and disgraceful death of an outlaw on the cross. However, all this cannot negate the prophecy spoken to Mary:

*And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever …*

That is what remains. And, at the latest, come Easter it turns out to be true. Therefore we find Mary back among they slowly but surely realise: it all had to be this way. That’s why the evangelist Luke wants to make clear right from the start what’s the purpose and meaning of God’s reign: to see people in their lowliness, to call them out of their insignificance, to strengthen them with the hope that the Son of God will bring about the miracle of transformation. Whoever hears this message today doesn’t have to fail because of a contradiction, a defeat or humiliation – no matter how many things seem to suggest resignation. For there is more reason than ever to praise God like Mary did and thank Him and, under the shadow of God’s mercy, start upon the rocky path towards what has been promised.

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, shall guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.* Amen.

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