

## **A Sermon Preached at the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle Mothers' Union Lady Day Service 2010**

The Dean of Newcastle, The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney

*Hebrews 10. 5-17*

I take my text this morning from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,  
'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,  
but a body you have prepared for me;  
in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings  
you have taken no pleasure.  
Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God"  
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).' (Hebrews 10. 5-7)

As a missional diocese and a missional church we're called, in Archbishop Michael Ramsey's words, to explore 'the meaning of the incarnation of God and the coming of the Kingdom of God in the world' and 'to be exposed to the vision of heaven and the tragedies of mankind.' (Ramsey, 1984, p. 162) Our Lady's 'Yes' admits her to the full vision of heaven and the deep tragedies of humanity; her response takes us with her into that same experience because it joins her life with that of God in Christ.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes to affirm the strength of the new covenant in Christ, against the insufficiency of the old. The author regards the old cult as a shadow of the new; it is a failure in its goal 'to make perfect those who draw near' because it operates in the realm of the unreal. The angelic encounter in today's gospel might seem equally unreal but it is full of the marks of the real world in which each and every one of us seeks to discern and live out our Christian vocation.

It is, for example, a great story of interruption; and it reminds us that God is continually interrupting our lives. Sometimes he finds us ready and receptive; sometimes he has to shake us to get our attention.

What we celebrate on Lady Day is the process and the moment in which God 'prepares a body'. We gather to celebrate the sanctification of the human through Our Lady. This sanctification happens in the drawing near of God.

When we consider Mary's great "yes" to God, her free and loving act of cooperation with God in the incarnation, we may well tend to focus on the experience of a young Jewish girl facing the massive implications for her at that one time; the cost of a strange pregnancy. Yet Mary's song suggests she looks at a far wider historic horizon than just that of her own present life and the unknown territory into which this message will take her.

The Song of Mary, the *Magnificat*, looks backward and forward in time, to events that have been long before and events that are yet to come, all of which will have the familiar character of the God of Israel's saving action.

The *Magnificat* looks back to the Exodus and the first Passover, the fundamental story of God's salvation of God's people from slavery. The plight of the Israelites in Egypt and God's response to it lies behind the statement that he has "cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly". Mary understands what God is doing in her again as an act of the same order, as another mighty act of deliverance – but to say that means more than pious acceptance of the will of God for her life at that present time; it means an openness to the way that God will act and be known in the future, which would not be by making a way through the wilderness and the sea but by setting out on a way to the cross.

Some of the old masters of European painting perceived this same connection – there are depictions of the Annunciation in which, as Mary receives the Angel's word and gives her "yes", the tiny son of God descends as on a ray of light – carrying his cross even at the time of his conception. This reminds us that the Annunciation is always what John Donne called an 'abridgement' of Christ's story.

Year by year we remember parts of this story, whether or not we make all the connections. But as the Mothers' Union gathers year by year at this time to remember not only the Annunciation to Mary but in effect also the other events clustered around this time, we are committing ourselves to being part of the same continuing cycle of God's action in history. Wherever children are at risk, wherever families are struggling, the message of an angel is not just a sacred memory but an example of God's continuing, persistent action throughout history.

Bruce Kay has written about Australian Anglicanism that:

A better sense of *who* we are and a more realistic appreciation of where we are can provide the basis for some confidence about the future. Not because we can trust in systems or traditions or the latest business fashion for mission and strategies,

but because the God whom we worship was with our forefathers, and thus, in the tradition which we inherit, that same God is at work today in our society and our church. It is our awareness of God's presence in the world that will enable us, with some reasonable confidence at least, to have a go. (Kaye, 1995, pp. 3-4)

By becoming part of one human family Jesus blessed us immeasurably; but by offering his life for the whole human family we have been given freedom and fullness of life. Mary's "yes" was to all these things – yes to incarnation, yes to cross, yes to resurrection – yes to her unlikely family and yes to what God will keep doing year by year with all of us, the universal family of God.

And here, the church speaks not from a position of privileged insight into God's ways, but from a vulnerable position of pilgrimage within history. Standing within history, the church sees another world to which it humbly bears witness.

#### References

- Kaye, Bruce, *A Church without Walls. Being Anglican in Australia*. North Blackburn, Victoria, Dove, 1995
- Ramsey, A.M., 'Epilogue: Looking to the Future, 1984', in Vogel A.A. (ed.), *Theology in Anglicanism*, Wilton, Morehouse Barlow, 1984