

"NO PROBLEM"
Luke 1:26-38

There's a young girl – twelve, thirteen, fourteen maybe. She's ready to be married off. A husband has been found and an agreement has been reached that they will soon be wed. She doesn't have any education – it's not the done thing for girls. Her mother's taught her all she needs to know about coping with running a home. She follows the religion of her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother – sits at the back of the synagogue and listens to the reading of the Torah if there's no-one trying to chat to her at the time; she keeps the Sabbaths and the festivals. She knows the stories of her religion, the history of her people – at least, as much as she needs to know. *"Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."* That's the core of her faith. That's all she needs to know. Her husband will take care of all the rest.

And there she stands, alone in the house one morning, busying herself with the routine of the home, her mind full of the aspirations and anxieties of a fiancée. And something very strange happens. Somehow, there's someone else in the room. The light is different. The atmosphere is different. There is a figure standing in front of her. She's never seen him (her?) before, but nevertheless she seems to recognise him. There is a strange beauty about this figure, a curious radiance, an other-worldliness. And when he speaks the voice is haunting and unusual – both calming and disturbing at the same time. *"Hail, most highly favoured woman! This is about God."*

Naturally, the girl is bewildered. She can't make it out. *What's going on? Who are you? Where have you come from? Why is this happening to me?* Do you recognise the feeling? Here you are, pottering along with your quiet faith and sketchy understanding of God's ways – and suddenly things start to happen that you're rather baffled by. Somehow, God seems to be trying to make contact with you. Sometimes that can be in a very unusual way, something that reaches deep into your being and stirs you up inside. Sometimes it can be just a little ruffling of the waters of your otherwise mundane and structured life. But what is it? What's happening here? Where's this leading?

"Don't worry, Mary," says the visitor, the messenger, the *angelos*, the angel. "Don't worry, God has *graced* you. You are highly favoured. You have found favour with God. God has poured out his grace on you. He has touched your life in a way that means you'll never be the same again. Somehow, he has chosen you and made you an object of his special love." There's no indication that the girl has done anything special; she hasn't been poring over books and scrolls; she hasn't, as far as we know, been especially diligent in good works and charity. She's an ordinary girl – like you are an ordinary person. But God wants to grace her, to touch her, to change her life and her perspective on things.

You – ordinary person – with your hopes and fears for the future, with your energy channelled into fulfilling your routines and your obligations, God has graced you. You're nothing special, in many ways. You're not a paragon of virtue, a person who has worked so splendidly and so tirelessly that you're well nigh perfect, ready to step into the arms of God by your own efforts. But God has graced you. God has made it possible, through the work of his own Son, for you to be changed. He loves you. He's forgiven you. He wants the best for you. That can be a bit disturbing in itself – the thought that God is actually taking an interest in you – you, out of all the billions of people who are walking and have walked this earth. But be encouraged, don't be anxious. God loves you. God gives you his grace. Receive it.

But that's not all, is it? It never is, when you're dealing with God. To know that you are graced by God is one thing, a wonderful thing. But the angel goes on. While the girl is still getting her head around the fact that God has spotted her and decided to grace her, the visitor stuns her with the news that she – and only she, of course – is to be the channel by which God is to enter his world as a human being. It starts off fairly well. She's going to have a child. Fair enough: she's about to be married. You don't have to be an anointed prophet to work out that there's a fair chance of some kind of offspring from the union. Predicting the sex is a bit more impressive, but still only a 50% chance of getting it wrong. The angel tells her what its name is going to be (the wonder factor rises), and then goes on to make some predictions about what kind of person he will grow up to be, and that he will be, actually, the Son of God.

You see, it's not just the kind of job that any ordinary, everyday little teenager could do – giving birth to a baby. This is a special job. A job that only one person in all of history can do. A job that only Mary will be able to do – giving birth to the Son of the Most High. God has graced her for a reason. He wants to work through her.

Well, at least there's one job God will not call you to do. Mary's done it. But God has graced **you** for a reason, too. He's got a job for you to do. A job that no-one else can do. She was in the right place at the right time, so that God's plan could be fulfilled. So are you. You are the only person with the set of friends, family, colleagues that you have. You are the only person with just the combination of gifts that you have. You are the only person with those friends, gifts, grace in your office, school, neighbourhood, church at this time. God's calling you. God's telling you – "I have a task for you. And it's going to have eternal consequences." It may be just witnessing, just talking about Jesus and living for him day by day. It may be simply reaching out with the love of Jesus to those in need – no words, no preaching, just action. Or it may be the mighty, daunting job of praying, interceding for those whom only you know have problems, for those situations that only you are aware of.

"Hang on, though," says the girl. "I haven't yet done any of the things my mum tells me I need to do if I'm going to have a baby. How can this happen? It's all very well God gracing me, giving me a job, sending an angel to tell me all about it, but ... well, you know. I'm still a virgin. Don't I need something else? A man, for example?" How can it happen? I can cope with God gracing me. I can see he might have a job for me. But I can't possibly do it. It is, literally, inconceivable.

But we are talking about God things here. Nothing gets in the way of God's will being done. And if he has a job for you, he'll provide the means. In this case, it's the Holy Spirit. There's no need for any other human intervention. God's power will work within you, deep within you, deeper than your womb, deeper than your mind, in your very soul. Don't try and understand it. Just get on and believe it.

The angel is keen to show that, although this specific job is unique to Mary, God's at work doing similar things in other people. "You know that older cousin of yours, Elizabeth – Auntie Elizabeth, you call her, because she's so old: and you know the shame she's had to put up with because she can't have children. Well, there's one due in just three months. That's God, too. God can do it. He always has, he always will – and here's proof in your own family."

Well, ordinary person graced by God. God's got a job for you to do – just you, no-one else; that's the exciting thing. But you're thinking, "I couldn't possibly do that. I haven't got the resources. I don't have the background. I don't understand it all." Believe. Believe in a big God, a God of such power that he can overcome your petty objections a thousand times over. A God whose Holy Spirit has already turned the world upside down. A God who has shown his power in history – as kings and kingdoms have risen and fallen, as men and women have come and gone. A God

who has shown his power is his story – as his servants have performed miracles and spoken life-changing words, as his Son grew and taught and died and burst back into life. A God who is so awesome that even death and all its demons cannot stand in his way.

And look around you. Read the books, see the films, listen to the stories, watch the lives – he's doing similar things in other people. None of them can do exactly the job God wants you to do. But they are overcoming similar obstacles, confronting similar fears, dealing with similar feelings of inadequacy. The God who graces you and calls you also equips you.

The visitor is about to leave. Mary is shaken to her very core. But there's one more thing to say. This is the God of the possible – the God for whom nothing is impossible. What the angel actually says is that God's word is never impotent. If God says it, it happens. If God makes a promise, he keeps it. How about that? God has graced you, called you, equipped you. It will happen. Just go and act on the strength of that. Don't even think about it: do it. You're young? – no problem. You're a virgin? – no problem. You don't understand? – no problem. You don't think you could cope? – no problem.

Those angels are still flitting around, still turning up unannounced and misunderstood, still saying the same things. Can you hear them this morning, bringing God's words to you? God has shown you his grace. He has told you what he wants you to do – you've known for a while, really, but this morning's been a bit of a confirmation. He's promised to equip you, to fill you with his power and soak you in his Holy Spirit. He's made clear what's to happen and if he's said it, it'll happen. You're too young, too old? – no problem. You're unprepared? – no problem. You don't really understand? – no problem. You're scared stiff? – no problem. Nothing will prevent God's word being carried out.

Mary realised that. She had no alternative than to answer as she did. "I'm God's servant. It's going to happen just as you've said." But it wasn't just quiet resignation. It wasn't a sense of fatalism: just read her wonderful song of praise to God that she sings at Elizabeth's house. She knew God's word would be fulfilled whatever, and she was very, very pleased about it and her part in it.

What's your answer this morning? God says to you, "I have touched you with my grace – you, you of all people. And I have done that because I have a particular job that you, only you can do. Don't worry about it: I will give you all you need, I will fill you with my Holy Spirit. You don't believe me? Well look around and see what I'm doing in the lives of other people, ordinary people just like you. I have spoken, and I'm going to keep my promise." There's only one answer, "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.*" But you can say it with a smile on your face and joy in your heart. There's no greater privilege!