

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Enter Saint Luke

You can tell that something special is happening when the Lectionary takes a sudden swerve; Mark, our Gospel for this year, is silent about the birth of Jesus, as is John. Because we are now in the environs of Christmas, the Church turns to Luke, the Christmas evangelist, and, just on the cusp of midwinter (Wednesday is the shortest day) we read the story of the Annunciation, which takes us back (exactly nine months) to the spring.

### Watch Out For Angels

The commercial Christmas has converted angels into fairies, and put them on the top of Christmas Trees to smile plastic smiles and hopefully to glitter, and (mendaciously) to suggest three wishes. Angels are not like this. They are the irruption into our world of the word of God, which carries all before it. They are the arrival of the truth. They blow blasts on their trumpets which wake the dead. They announce messages which shake the earth and the heavens, and totally change lives. All who meet them are in need of immediate first-aid (I can't think of many incidents of angelic visitation that don't include the words *Do not be afraid*).

### The Truth Is Full Of Joy

Do you remember the fear that used to grip you as a child, when something new was about to happen? *You'll enjoy it*, they'd say, *it's great*. And you shivered, looking anxiously at the Deep End, or the quivering plate of mussels, or the script of the School Play, and feared the worst. I sometimes think babies keep falling asleep because they can't face any more reality just now; they need to take refuge in simple baby dreams. There are degrees of timidity among children, of course. But in all humanity the prospect of discovering utter truth can inspire terror. If an angel is a messenger of God, who is the whole truth, then terror seems perfectly in order when one confronts an angel. But so is obedience. If the angel tells you *Rejoice!* you jolly well rejoice! This is a lot to digest. We aren't usually in the position where the terror of a visiting archangel is upon us, at least not in this parish: so we can't easily be swayed by this command. But we can watch what happens to Mary in the story. She moves from being troubled to being obedient. And this brings us to the question of obedience.

**"I'm Not Saying Obey!"**

Roughly half the brides I speak to are anxious that their wedding promises should not include the word *obey*. (These brides are rather surprised when I tell them that in the Catholic liturgy for weddings the phrase doesn't appear.) But honestly, I can't think why they don't appear, because to me they seem entirely appropriate. If I loved someone enough to marry them, obedience would be a poor word for what I wanted to be to them. It is a huge privilege to be of service to someone you love; and to waive your own needs and desires in favour of theirs seems natural to me. I can imagine people wanting *both* partners in a marriage to promise obedience, but I can't understand why *either* of them should take exception to it. Now, in the Bible there are many places where obedience comes into play, in that human beings are *commanded* to do things they could not have wanted, or chosen, to do, so that the joy of God (as opposed to their own, limited and limiting version) may be a possibility for them. If you think God is just an *onlooker* to our plans and performances, then you will not understand this necessity. But one of the places where the analogy of *fatherhood* holds good for God is here.

### God Wants To Transform Our Life

Fathers often know better than their children; God's plans for us are divine, not merely human. Where (as on the Fourth Sunday of Advent) we are on the threshold between the human and the divine, there has to be a moment of obedience - a total gift of the self for a plan beyond our contrivance or imagining. His gift of life to us isn't finished yet; its fulness is still in the future. We could easily lose it, by settling for what we already have...and dying in disappointment, unfulfilled. Trusting God, we are to cancel our fond plans, make empty space of our agenda, so that he can fill it with his. The command to rejoice may seem paradoxical, even ridiculous, between humans. Coming from God, who has power to make it sensible, it's worth considering an act of Advent obedience.

*Fr Philip*