

SPECIAL CALLS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

IN MANY and various ways' God has spoken to his people (Heb 1,1). These many and various ways flow from the all-embracing and salvific Love which, having made men in his own image and likeness, and hence with a capacity to live in deep communion with him and with each other, seeks to draw them yet again, after the Fall, back into the embrace of that love (cf *Dei Verbum*, 3-4).

The Sacred Scriptures 'give expression to a lively sense of God', and, being 'written for our instruction' (Rom 15,4), show 'true divine pedagogy' (*Dei Verbum*, 4); they reveal how constantly and consistently God seeks to unveil the face of his Fatherhood to all, inviting them to form a people truly his own; in particular, they show how he freely chooses certain persons, both men and women who, by their total belonging to him, may walk with him in his loving and saving action (cf Eph 5,2).

Careful examination and prayerful reflection on the lives of certain outstanding biblical personalities reveal the characteristics of divine pedagogy: how God deals with man, how he prepares, initiates and promotes the growth of those called to collaborate in his plan; what happens in the hearts and lives of those who respond, allowing themselves to be led by him. Gradually certain patterns emerge, patterns of call and response whose features remain valid even in today's context, where God continues to call those whom he wills (cf Jn 3,8ff).

God calls whomsoever he wills

'I will raise up for myself (one) who shall do what is in my heart and in my mind' (1 Sam 2,35); 'no one can take such an honour . . . upon himself' — only 'he who is called by God' (Heb 5,4). Only he can intervene thus, step into the human situation, touch the deepest consciousness of a human being with that creative action which alone can give rise to the call and empower the free response. He is ever the prime mover, he needs no prompting; his choice, supremely free and gratuitous, falls on whomsoever he wills, regardless of age, class and culture. The ensuing call is the expression of serene,

steadfast and salvific love; a love both active and efficacious in the one who freely responds in love; and whosoever does respond in love becomes the channel of God's love for others, through whom it permeates the entire people of God.

The 'moment' of the call

A few brief phrases of Scripture may well express a reality which in fact took an indeterminate period to come to fruition. Nevertheless, even if the time-span remains vague, it is possible to pick out certain passages which depict the moment when a person, becoming aware that God is calling, responds to it. In this way we are enabled to highlight the various features of call and response.

The nomad Abraham — our 'father in the faith' — had attained the ripe old age of seventy-five when God's call resounded in his heart. An emigrant from the cultured and religious environment in Ur of the Chaldees, he came to settle in Haran, the home of his father. Indeed at such an age, one's way of life has long followed a set pattern, even though certain ambitions may still remain alive. The nomad longs for rich pasture, territory of his own; and Abraham also yearned for offspring, even though his hopes seemed futile.

At this point comes the imperative: 'Go' from country and kindred 'to the land which I will show you'. And God takes over in the life of Abraham. Called to leave all behind, he takes again to the road; but his direction will be revealed only as he obeys, as he 'journeys on' (Gen 12,9). If 'he went' (Gen 12,4), it was without knowing where he was to go (Heb 11,8). True, there was the promise: 'I will make of you a great nation' (Gen 12,1-2); but this is at best mysterious in view of Sarah's sterility. Even so, 'he went'. The life of the wanderer resumes, but with a definite break; it is a new departure. His longings remain; yet his future is hidden, and the fulfilment of the promise vague. His new purpose is at once clear and obscure. Henceforth, the only clarity, his luminous focal point, lies in his trusting abandonment to the One who, having called, now leads him wheresoever he wills. This God has promised to bless him (Gen 12,1-3). The promise, if mysterious, is unailing; this Abraham doggedly persists in believing. That God is founding on him a multitude, a nation, a people, is evident enough, hindsight. But for Abraham it meant above all the radical surrender of self-determination in order to follow the leading of his God; it meant accepting to live by the 'assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb 11,1).

Rescued from death as an infant (Exod 2,1-10), shaped by the training and experiences of his youth (2,11-15), Moses, sensitive to the sufferings of his people, indignant to the point of murdering one of their oppressors, has fled to the desert for refuge. It is here in the wilderness — more precisely on Horeb, the mountain of God — that his life takes a new turn. Yahweh communicates himself, Yahweh calls. The setting is more explicit than with Abraham, more mysterious, but no less concrete. Yahweh enters the human situation. He attracts Moses, draws him, calls him by name (3,4ff). He reveals himself, and in this very revelation — ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob’ — Moses, overcome with awe and fear, ‘hid his face’ (3,6). Yahweh reveals his compassionate love for his chosen people, his desire to free them, a desire which has already found echo in the heart of Moses. Once again we discover a certain continuity, but the invitation, ‘Come, I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth my people . . . out of Egypt’ (3,10), goes far beyond anything Moses could have envisaged. It becomes for him a terrifying prospect, a task for which he feels unsuited and which he will seek to evade.

The first book of Samuel provides another familiar instance of God choosing a human instrument to be his messenger. Samuel, the answer to the prayer of the barren Hannah, and promised ‘to the Lord all the days of his life’ (1 Sam 1,2-19), was brought to the Temple as a child. There, whilst Eli tolerated the evil-doing of his sons, Samuel ‘grew in stature and favour with God and men’ (2,26). Such is the young boy upon whom the choice of the Lord falls. The event is indeed familiar; perhaps its very simplicity and familiarity can risk obscuring its theological density.

It is still night: ‘the lamp of God had not yet gone out’. In the silence that pervades the Temple, ‘Samuel, Samuel’ is thrice repeated, echoing in the consciousness of the young boy. He responds with open heart and prompt spontaneity (3,4-8), thinking that his master, Eli, calls. Only gradually does Eli himself realize what is happening and suspect who calls; and with the wisdom of the old, he encourages in Samuel still further openness and docility to the voice which calls him by name (3,8-9). When the voice comes again, Samuel responds with equal readiness and with the uncluttered innocence of a child: a child who, having already grown in the service of the Lord, is now called to fulfil the daunting ministry of a prophet (3,11-14).

'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations' (Jer 1,5). When God invites someone into his service, he has already chosen that person, put his mark upon him, knit him together in his mother's womb (Ps 139,13), formed and shaped him in quiet, unobtrusive ways, through ordinary human situations within a normal environment, prepared him for the task reserved for him. He is truly 'known', 'called by name' . . . 'possessed' by God (Isai 53,1). The call occurs at whatever moment God pleases; neither youth, nor old age nor even human fragility are impediments; the prophet is called to surrender his being, so that in God's hands he may be the instrument through which God's own power and loving strength may be manifested.

The call maintains a certain continuity with the past, and yet demands a rupture — the rupture always presupposed when two people come together to love. Self-interest is relinquished to espouse the concerns of the other; self-determination is replaced by self-surrender. Although centred in the heart, this rupture and gift of self find concrete, practical expression.

When God does make such a call, it is always ultimately for the benefit of others. However, it has to be 'heard', recognized, received with an open heart. How often in the biblical context, the wilderness, the desert, the Temple, the mountain of God, silence, are the setting for that encounter between God and his creature which results in call and response. A suitable environment facilitates that inner attentiveness necessary for awareness of the call. None the less, once God has freely chosen and made known his choice, extended his invitation, even he must await the response — a response which must in turn flow from God-given freedom.

Initial response to the call

To attempt to isolate any one aspect of the call is like trying to separate the interwoven strands of a united whole; and here, even more complex and delicate, one is dealing with the dynamic interaction established between God and the person of his choice. However, even at the risk of a certain artificiality, it is enlightening to consider separately some of these elements or strands.

The sobriety of the Genesis texts risks veiling the full implications of Abraham's initial response: 'he went', 'he journeyed on' . . . 'he passed through the land', with aging wife, and family and possessions. Concrete, practical — utterly demanding. Two words

resume his inner attitude: he believed (Gen 15,6), and he obeyed (Heb 11,8-17).

Samuel, the innocent simplicity and the promptness of whose response is clear, yet knew fear and hesitation before carrying out the task allotted to him (1 Sam 3,18).

Both Moses and Jeremiah are overwhelmed by the prospect of what lies ahead. The sensitive, gentle Jeremiah recoils before the task he will eventually fulfil: 'Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth' (Jer 1,6-8). Moses displays even more persistence in trying to evade the demands of the God of his fathers. After the initial overwhelming meeting, there ensues his struggle, his wrestling with God (the first of many): 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?' . . . 'What shall I say to the people?' . . . 'But they will not believe me' . . . 'I am not eloquent!' 'Pray, send some other person' (Exod 3,11-4,13). It takes time, and considerable persuasion, to say nothing of signs (Exod 3,12.20;4,2-17), before Moses 'took his wife and sons . . . and went back to the land of Egypt' (4,20).

God, in calling men to his service, acts in sovereign freedom, but with respect for the freedom of the person he chooses. In every instance there are two free wills at work. Having drawn the person of his choice, called him by name and endowed him with the capacity to respond, he awaits that response with regard for the uniqueness of each one, with his fears, his doubts and hesitations; he engages in 'dialogue', provides reassurance, with the familiar 'Do not fear, I am with you' (Exod 3,12.20; Jos 1,5-9).

The alacrity of Isaiah's, 'Here I am, send me', stands out as unique. Together with his 'woe is me', it forms the seemingly paradoxical double note of a single cry wrenched from the depths of his being under the impact of his contact with an all-holy God: one which marks him irrevocably as a man of God — set apart, consecrated. It is surely here that one touches upon the core, the vital nerve-centre of any vocation.

The core of the call: experience of God initiating a relationship

Whoever is called is indeed a man touched by God and endowed with a capacity to fulfil God's purpose. Whatever the age, background or circumstances of the biblical personalities in question, all were men who had in some way met God, and who were indelibly marked, moved and changed by that contact. The precise nature of such a touch eludes human description; the author

may grapple with words in an attempt to convey something of the reality and surround it with restraint and sobriety; it may also be that the awareness of the call impinges only very gradually on the consciousness of the one called. Whatever the manner of the call, it is both shrouded by and expressive of the mystery of a God who, in steadfast loving-kindness, reaches out to enfold the work of his hands. For this purpose he invites those whom he wills to participate in and reflect some facet of this love in a particular way, and in accordance with the needs of those he is sent to serve. The whole mission of the one chosen is 'encapsulated', as it were, in this moment of contact with God; and its enduring quality and efficacy vouch for its authenticity. It is well to reflect here on those whose call is depicted with particular vividness, in order to bring fresh focus to the reality which is at the root of every call.

Not infrequently, those who are called remember the place, day and hour, the detailed circumstances with extreme clarity. So it was for Ezekiel (1,1-3), for Moses and Isaiah. For both Moses and Isaiah, fire — the burning bush, the seraph with a burning coal (Exod 3,2-3; Isai 6,6) — at once symbolizes and evokes not only the intensity of their experience of God and the irresistible attraction he exercised over them; it also conveys something of the nature of the God who reveals himself. In this moment of contact with him, some experience and awareness of his inmost nature is so impressed upon the personality of the prophet that in the same movement he is driven to communicate it. He becomes burdened with a truth he cannot withhold: be it God's Love, his Truth, his transcendent Holiness and Sacredness. He bears the imprint of the living God; henceforth he must of necessity be himself its living manifestation.

The call of Isaiah is starkly vivid — his message indeed summed up in his vocation. Overwhelmed at once by the sheer holiness of God and his own sinfulness and need of purification, 'Woe is me', he cries, 'I am lost . . . a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' (Isai 6,5) And with this, after his cry of 'Send me', Isaiah himself virtually disappears behind the message to which his life is given over. His experience of the all Holy, Transcendent, Mighty God gives rise to his constant preaching of unflinching faith and unswerving trust in God alone.

The burning touch of God, if purifying, is also unifying; it is a union of love and friendship which he seeks to establish with each of his prophets. He seeks a union such that he himself becomes

manifest in his chosen one. The prophet, by his words, but above all by his very being, becomes a 'sign' (cf Isai 8,18;20,3; Jer 16,1-13; Ezek 4,3;12,6;24,15-24; Hos 1-2) bespeaking some facet of the face of God. The highly symbolic language used to portray the call of Ezekiel is indicative of this. 'Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you' . . . 'all my words that I speak to you, receive into your heart and hear with your ears' (Ezek 3,10.3; cf Jer 1,9); and we are told that he ate the scroll, and it was as sweet as honey in his mouth (Ezek 3,3). Having experienced God (1,1-28) and been invested with his spirit, Ezekiel is sent to the rebellious people of Israel (2,3-5), not as a mere 'conveyor' of God's message. He must totally assimilate it, be possessed by it as by God himself, so that, when speaking, he gives voice to God's own word. His message, though harsh, will bring the sweet hope of a God who will truly shepherd his flock (ch 34), bring new life and a new spirit to the heart of his people (ch 37), and, having rescued them from infidelity, will bind them to himself in covenanted love (ch 16).

Called by name, and drawn without realizing it into the place of meeting, Moses finds himself in his stance of truth before God; he 'puts his shoes from off his feet' (Exod 3,5), 'hides his face' (3,6); reverence and holy fear possess him as he is confronted with this God whose love is a consuming fire. Only gradually does Moses come to know and identify with this compassionate love. Far from being distant and indifferent to the plight of his people, Yahweh 'has seen . . . has heard', knows their suffering and comes to relieve it (3,7-10). Moses too has been exposed to the plight of his fellow-men, has been roused to anger by the injustice meted out to them, and driven to revenge. He will be instrumental in delivering them from the oppressor because he will be acting in the name of God who will himself accomplish his promise, who guarantees his ongoing presence and support (3,8:12,20). This God will reveal to Moses his mysterious name, with all the resonance attached to the biblical use of 'name' (3,13.14; cf 19,16-25). He will so draw Moses into intimacy with himself that what had been revenge will be transformed into the love and compassion of Yahweh himself. He will never be alone, God will be with him, teaching him what he should speak (3,12;4,12), speaking in him, bringing about the liberation of the people, and, above all, drawing them too into a covenant relationship with himself. Through Moses, God will come to be known as the God of 'steadfast love' (Deut 7,6-9) who draws his people, consecrating them as his own possession. Here the

purpose of his call is fulfilled.

Like each and every one of the prophets and patriarchs, Moses is a man for others. He is chosen so that not only he, but the entire people, may enter into a relationship of love with the living God, calling him by name (Exod 3,13-15;24,3-8) and obeying his ways. The closer Moses grows in intimacy with God, the more he accomplishes the mission entrusted to him; and simultaneously, his bond with the people is intensified; a bond shaped by God in his heart from within the very experience of that mission. In like manner, as the people let themselves be led by God's chosen one, so their bonds with each other become more close-knit (19,4-8;24,3). In the measure that this is achieved, God's work is done, and acknowledged as his in thanksgiving and worship (Exod 3,12;6,7-8;16,6-12).

Growth to maturity — the testing of time

The vividness of the language, and the apparently sudden and dramatic nature of the call of prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel, must in no way obscure or give the lie to the hard, sober and down-to-earth nature of the response. Relationship with God, developing in terms of persevering fidelity and leading to close friendship, is a call to endure, to be purified and refined by the inevitable opposition and frequent rejection which seems the common lot of the prophet, as well as by the terrible testing of time.

Whoever responds to God's call must, having once 'set forth' (Gen 12,5), 'journey on' by stages (Gen 12,9; Exod 17,1ff), with an inner readiness to be moved and led on wherever God leads. The man once touched by God becomes a 'wanderer'. The physical wanderings of Abraham and Moses were the geographical human background and context for the relentless inner pursuit of that word which had one day resounded in their hearts, the 'promise'; 'I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you' (Gen 28,15). Their God was the God of the journey, who would reveal himself at he alone knew what turn in the road, on what mountain-top or by what wayside shrine, chance-meeting or encampment. Their only security lay in an ever-deeper cleaving to God in faith and trust, following his direction step by step in a task the ultimate purpose of which lay hidden — except to him, and along ways which defied human logic — 'his ways' (Isai 55,8). They were engaged on a road of discovery — a discovery of the ever new implications of their 'yes' to his call. And the God who called is ever doing 'a new thing' (Isai 43,19;48,6-8; Apoc 21,5) and shaping his

disciple to new depths of openness (Isai 50,4;54,13). There is never any once-for-all response to his call.

So Abraham travels the length of Canaan, Egypt, the Negeb, always setting off anew, moving further on (Gen 12,3.8;15,4-5, etc.), drawn on by faith. The bearer of a promise, he meets with constant deception, frustration, contradiction; this he accepts, even to the point of being prepared to sacrifice the fulfilment of his dreams, his son Isaac, in the knowledge that God has power even to raise someone from the dead (Heb 11,19). In this very pilgrimage, Abraham is fulfilling what God asks of him; he is walking in his presence — his friend (Gen 17,1; Isai 41,8); and all the while God is in fact gradually revealing himself, his name, establishing a covenant with Abraham and his offspring. The foundations of God's chosen people are laid as the father of believers matures in rock-like faith.

Failure and rejection beset Moses in his attempts to fulfil God's demands. The heart of Pharaoh is hardened; the Israelites themselves look upon him with distrust; they murmur incessantly against him as well as against their God. Their rebelliousness drives Moses to complain to Yahweh — to prefer death to continuance in the task: 'blot me out of thy book' (Exod 32,32). But it is in and through such trials, and the ongoing dialogue with him, that Moses grows in his relationship with his Lord, that he comes to realize and acknowledge that it is God alone who acts, and whose work will be recognized for what it is (Exod 7,5;11,9;14,4, etc.).

There can be few better illustrations of the struggles which beset the prophet than the life of Jeremiah. Formed, appointed and equipped for his mission, he remains nevertheless a man of gentle, sensitive nature. It comes hard on him to set about his task to pluck up and tear down, even though he is touched by God and enriched by his word (Jer 1,9-10). Warned and reassured that 'they will fight against you, but not prevail, for I am with you to deliver you' (1,19), yet he is well-nigh overcome, so greatly does misunderstanding, hardship, persecution come his way. Overwhelmed by the mystery of evil, threatened with death, become like a lamb led to slaughter (11,19), he pours out his heart to God: 'Why does the way of the wicked prosper?', 'to thee have I committed my cause', 'correct me, but in just measure, not in thy anger lest thou bring me to nothing' (Jer 1,1;11,20;10,24). And yet it is amid these very burdens that he experiences the truth of God's promise to be with him.

Even so, there comes the moment in which he falls prey to a crisis

of discouragement. 'Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land!' (15,10ff) He is caught in the trap of self-pity and near despair, whence he reaches out, 'Lord, remember me and visit me' (Jer 15,15). The experience becomes the point of renewed call and response: 'If you come back, I will take you back . . . if you utter noble, not despicable thoughts . . .' (15,19). This, and the remembrance of his original call become the point of repentance, conversion and renewed surrender to God, renewed commitment to his task, even though this also means renewed anguish: anguish on the one hand of the 'reproach and derision' (20,8) which surround him when he proclaims the word, on the other the devouring fire in his bones when he tries to restrain it (20,9). Ultimately it is the power of God which proves strongest, and Jeremiah continues to allow himself to be 'seduced'.

Through such alternations of trial and desolation in the accomplishment of their mission, and the peace which flows therefrom, as from the presence of God who never fails in his promise to 'be with', the prophets are themselves moulded and shaped, as by the potter (Jer 18,1-6), to become increasingly fit instruments in God's hands. The very afflictions which beset them prompt further, deeper ongoing dialogue between the prophets and their Lord. Thus the prophet is increasingly transformed and made apt to proclaim the word as his relationship is intensified and deepened.

The type of relationship which God wishes to establish with the prophet is no less than that he seeks with Israel herself, one so deep and intimate that the only human analogy which approaches it is marriage. The concept runs like a thread through the Scriptures, finding supreme expression in the book of Hosea; it was to such a relationship that Hosea was called upon to give symbolic prophetic expression by his whole existence, taking to wife the unfaithful Gomer, and surrounding her with unswerving and tender love (Hos 1,2-11).

The marriage which God seeks to establish, even within the fragility of human nature, is a marriage whereby the Maker is the husband, and the bond one of steadfast and tender mutual love (Isai 54,4;62,5; Hos 1,14.19; Ezek 16). Could it not be that something akin to this was the bond established between Moses and his God in those final phases of his life when that man of the wilderness, the mountain-top, the tent of meeting, found increasing favour with God? He knew God by name, knew his ways, spoke with him 'face to face' as with a friend (Exod 33,11-23). Ultimately he became as it

were 'transparent', a living reflection of the living God (34,24). According to the measure of their call and God's grace, such is the vocation of all the prophets.

A reluctant prophet

Some amusing yet enlightening comments on what a prophet is (or is not) called to be are contained in the brief, humorous but by no means historical narrative tucked in among the minor prophetic books. It is the story of Jonah, a smug post-exilic Jew, ensconced in his ivory tower of strict observance and racial self-sufficiency, preserved from contact with non-Jews, and his struggle with God who wills the salvation of all. And God calls Jonah to be his prophet!

Jonah is sent to preach repentance to the inhabitants of the pagan capital of Nineveh. To comply would mean conceding that non-Jews are also within the embrace of God's love; which in turn would imply a whole reversal of Jonah's principles, his thinking, his attitudes. Jonah flees, as far away as he can (Jon 1,3-4ff) in stubborn refusal. He takes to the sea; but neither sailors, nor sea, nor fish can stomach him for long. God has his own ways of achieving his ends — albeit with tongue in cheek!

Eventually (for peace's sake?) Jonah 'set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of Yahweh' (3,3). There, the message is received — it is after all God's word which never returns to him empty (Isai 55,11) — the mission accomplished, and the entire city repents and is converted. And Jonah sulks! He is enraged with God who is (even Jonah is compelled to admit) a 'God of tenderness and compassion' (Jon 4,2). His anger persists; he would die rather than change.

The complete antithesis of what a prophet is called to be, Jonah is rigid, self-assured, stubborn, self-centred and conceited; unable even to enter into contact with God, let alone listen or deepen a relationship with him or be pliable in his hands, thus taking on his mind and heart and fulfilling his will.

Even so, God, 'rich in graciousness' to all, including Jonah, with gentle irony tries to bring him round (Jon 4,6-11). To any avail? We leave Jonah meditating (or still sulking?) by the withered remains of the castor-oil plant — and wonder!

The perfect response: the handmaid of the Lord

A long history of growth and development takes place between the call of Abraham and the fourth century 'parable' of Jonah. During

this time, the people of God grew in their understanding of Yahweh's salvific action, of their own relationship with him. The teaching of the prophets led to a greater awareness that Yahweh loved Israel as a child and as a bride (for example, Isai 49,15;62,5; Hos 11,1.4.8); he carries, cares for, leads her, longs for her with tender yearning; he himself will come to deliver and save her. His advent is awaited with purified hope by the faithful of Israel, the 'poor ones' alive with expectation. Having spoken in many and varied ways, God would, in the fulness of time, speak his Word into the world (Heb 1,1), his Son 'born of a woman' (Gal 4,4) — a woman in whom the call of Yahweh would, at last, meet with the most perfect response.

The lucan narrative highlights the continuity between the Old Testament calls and that of Mary, but with significant differences. In her, both call and response surpassed all that had gone before, and leads to that form of discipleship which will be initiated by Jesus himself.

The details of the event have reached us only because Mary herself must have confided them to the early christian community. The setting and the time are noted; for her, too, a moment of such import is remembered with clarity. It was 'in the sixth month' that Yahweh made himself known to Mary in the little town of Galilee. God, who came to Abraham in the home of his fathers, to Isaiah in the Temple, to David amid his flock and Amos at the ploughshare, found it fitting that, in coming to make in her his dwelling-place, he should visit Mary in the homeliness of her own dwelling in Nazareth. For to take her as his home was the purpose and implication of the message.

The burden of the angel's message and of Mary's mission is encapsulated in the initial greeting of the angel, who enters in to touch the young maiden with God's presence: 'Hail. . . Rejoice, so highly favoured. The Lord is with you' (Lk 1,28). In the original hebrew or the greek text, this 'new name' (*chaire kecharitōmenē*) is a succinct form of alliterative address which defies translation. 'Hail (or rejoice) thou, highly favoured one . . . thou who art filled with and therefore full of grace'. This grace or favour of which Mary is the object is freely given, freely bestowed: she is engifted, engraced, the object of God's predilection and delight.

So Mary, known by name, 'knit together' in the womb of Anne, the object of divine favour and hence filled with grace and shaped for a unique mission, is greeted by the angel in terms which could not

fail to find resonances in her heart, familiar as she must have been with the Scriptures and the longings and messianic expectations of her race. Moreover, the habit of contemplative listening, of 'pondering these things in her heart', did not come suddenly upon her (Lk 2,19.51); and hence something of the significance of the angel's greeting must have dawned upon her. She is addressed as the personification of Israel, the true daughter of Zion in and through whom the longings of the people of God will be fulfilled. She is told that she herself is the dwelling place of God (cf Deut 7,21; Isai 12,6; Zeph 3,17; Zach 2,10;9,9; Joel 2,27, etc.). It is hardly surprising then, that Mary would cast about in her mind with a certain perplexity, wondering 'what sort of greeting this might be' (Lk 1,29), and what could be its precise significance and implications.

The word of reassurance, both needed and received by the prophets, is given also to Mary. With the 'do not be afraid' (Lk 1,30), comes the more than familiar 'I am with you'. God is indeed with her, being 'in her midst'. She is herself the *shekinah*, the new ark and dwelling place of God. What the angel now gives is the clarification as to the manner of this presence: 'you will conceive *in your womb*'. God will be in the midst of his people by taking up his dwelling-place in the womb of the true Daughter of Zion; and her child, Jesus, will be the Lord, the victorious saviour of his people (Lk 1,31ff; cf Zeph 3,7), the suffering servant called to bear the iniquities of the world, to be loaded with and pinned to a cross for claiming to be the Son of the Most High whose kingdom is not of this world. In order that this unique presence of God may be brought about in the womb of Mary, she will be enveloped by the shadow of God's power, of his Spirit, as by the cloud which surrounded the tent of meeting (Exod 40,35; Lk 1,35).

Her perplexity allayed, Mary is now enlightened and sure in the knowledge that it is God who will act: he with whom nothing is impossible. In the obedience of faith, she surrenders to his call. She is the lowly handmaid of the Lord, the servant who waits upon and is ever attentive to his word, ready to do his bidding, to serve his purpose: 'Let it be done to me according to your word' (Lk 1,38).

Like the prophets before her, but in a unique way, Mary is the channel of God's creative, salvific action; she, as no other, is totally at his disposal in utter simplicity and poverty: a poverty which is no barren void, but pure virginal capacity for God. Her whole being is of God and for God; of her it can truly be said that she was transparent and quietly radiant with God. In the graciousness of her *fiat*,

she surrenders all that she is and has to be taken over and possessed by him. Hearer and doer of the word, she now becomes bearer of the Word Incarnate: 'and the Word was made flesh . . . not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God'.

Mary too is given a sign — the fruitfulness of her cousin, Elizabeth — to strengthen her in the mysterious journey of faith on which she must now set forth. Her life continues and yet is radically changed, transformed; rising up in haste (Lk 1,39) to visit her cousin — a deeply human gesture — she simultaneously set out with joyous promptitude on her mission of carrying the Word.

'Blessed is she who believed' (Lk 1,45). Mary's faith too, was fostered and refined, it grew in maturity with the testing of time. She too knew the anguish, the trials which beset all who have staked their whole existence upon God's word and who walk in the darkness of faith wherever he leads. Mary stands firm in faith as Joseph thinks to 'put her away' (Mt 1,18-21), in the circumstances of Jesus's birth (Lk 2,1-14; Mt 2,1-18), in the hardships of exile, in her failure to understand her own Son (Lk 2,50); she ponders the words of Simeon (Lk 2,29-35), of Jesus himself in the various situations of his life: the Temple, Cana, his ministry. . . . With the dignity and discretion of deep affection and love, she is there, present, yet as from a distance, watching, waiting, wondering, always steadfast in the faith which endures; standing firm even to the point of standing at the foot of the Cross, believing . . . in her Son, and (like Abraham) in God who is more powerful than death — believing even as she held her dead Child in her arms. We are not told of their meeting after the Resurrection; but she, who remained ever 'overshadowed by the power of the most High', is found still standing serenely firm in faith, supporting the faith of those whom Jesus (at the point of death) had confided to her care, still the handmaid attentive and awaiting, with them, the outpouring of his Spirit at Pentecost.

Queen of Patriarchs, Queen of Prophets, Mother of the Word Incarnate, Mother of Christ's body, the Church. If Mary is all these it is because of her steadfast response to God's call. Because of her continual 'let it be done to me according to your word', God's call was in her supremely efficacious, enabling him 'who is mighty' to do great things in her, the lowly handmaid of the Lord.

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