

Gervaise Phinn, a school inspector in Yorkshire for many years, recalls in one of many nativities, Gabriel's annunciation to Mary. He writes: "The heavenly spirit was a tall self-conscious boy dressed in a flowing white robe, large paper wings and sported a tinsel halo, somewhat crooked. Having wiped his nose on his sleeve, he glanced around suspiciously then sidled up to Mary, as a dodgy market-trader might, to see if you were interested in buying something from under the counter.

'Who are you?' Mary asked sharply, putting down her duster and placing her hands on her hips. This was not the quietly spoken, gentle-natured Mary I was used to. 'I'm the angel Gabriel', the boy replied with a deadpan expression and in a flat voice. 'I come with tidings of great joy. You're having a baby'. 'I'm not'. 'You are'. 'Who says?' 'God, and he sent me to tell you. Oh, and you must call it Jesus'. 'I don't like the name Jesus. Can I call him something else?' 'No'. 'What about Gavin?' 'No!' the angel snapped. 'You have to call it Jesus. Otherwise you don't get it.' 'All right then', Mary agreed, 'but what am I going to tell Joseph?' 'Tell him it's God's'.

Fast forward to the inn and Mary and Joseph facing a hard-nosed Yorkshire innkeeper, aged ten. 'There is no room at't inn. How many more times do I have to tell thee?' (Joseph) 'She's having a babby, tha knows'. 'Well, I can't help that, it's nowt to do wi' me'. 'I know', sighed Joseph, as he turned to the audience, 'and it's nowt to do with me neither'.

Well, this might be "out of the mouths of babes" but in fact this is possibly more like the real Mary and Joseph than the sort of vapid virgins and almost invisible Josephs that we get in Christian art (we just celebrated St Joseph this week on 19th March). Mary isn't just some empty vessel passively waiting to be filled. She may be young but she's tough, and she's got her own history. She has a family whose names we know (Anna and Joachim, Elizabeth and Zechariah), and as an Israelite she stands in the tradition of Miriam the prophetess, who as Pharaoh's army drowned in the Red Sea, got out her tambourine and whirled and danced in triumph as the poor old Egyptians became fish-food. And in the Magnificat Mary's prophetic voice is still heard to day – a charter for the poor of the world (He hath put down the mighty from their seat and the rich he hath sent empty away) – a charter to make the oppressors and exploiters of this world tremble.

So Mary might be perplexed about how this shall be but she isn't – as you might expect – paralysed either by the appearance of an angel, nor by his message.

And of course this won't be the last time Mary will be perplexed. The visit of the Magi with their disturbing gifts, losing her precocious son in the temple (remember his annoyingly adolescent reply: I must be about my father's business when his parents are crazy with worry), that wedding in Cana where he does it again when she asks him to help (woman, what is that to you or to me?), the time she sent a posse of relatives to bring him home because they thought he was – quote – out of his mind (who are my mother, my sisters, my brothers?) – all of those moments when Simeon's warning of a sword to pierce her womb must have come back to her so painfully – to which her response is always to ponder these things in her heart, to treasure them, wonder about them and wonder about him, and trust.

This yes to the angel, which is her “Yes” to God she never goes back on. From the crib to the Cross, standing at the very foot of the Cross itself, she must have wondered: Is this how my story ends? Is this the end of my Yes? But it won’t be, because on the other side of Easter on the Day of Pentecost she’ll be there with the disciples and those tongues of fire that alight on them will alight on her too. So maybe Queen of the Apostles isn’t too high a title for one who was first to say Yes.

The thing that struck me most forcefully and movingly on my first Walsingham Pilgrimage last year was that this “Yes” is what Walsingham is all about. I went, I confess, pretty afraid that it would be a kind of gin and lace high Anglicanism I don’t really have much time for – more birettas that you could shake a stick at, that kind of thing. But it was anything but.

Most of the pilgrims around us were from some of the most deprived parts of the country, and their priests too. And in that place Mary did for us what she always does, the only thing she exists to do, which is to point to Jesus. What you hear as you make the stations of the Cross, or attend Mass or Benediction, or simply as you are moved by the folks around you or touched by the atmosphere of the place is Mary’s words, clear as a bell, those words she spoke to the steward of the feast at the wedding at Cana: Whatever he says to you, do it.

She says to you: I gave my “Yes”. Now what about yours? Just as it was in Mary, God’s salvation history is already written in our hearts. And that history of the journey we’ve shared with God so far, of God’s goodness to us, the way he’s brought us through our own trials and exiles and times of abandonment and times of joy, through life and death, joy and suffering – all of this should bring us to the tiptoe of expectancy of what God is going to ask of us now. (And there couldn’t be a better time to be doing this than now, as we’re sharing our Lenten journey with Jesus – bearing our share of the Cross but trusting in the promise of Ester). And all of this in the world just as it is, a world that with so much bad news and violence and sin needs us to allow the Christ to be reborn in us daily for ourselves and for the world. One saint wrote: what good is it if he is born in Mary, if he is not born in me?

The annunciation, God’s annunciation to you and me, the special, unique word he has for you right now, is an invitation to trust. It’s an invitation for us to find in our hearts and on our lips our very own Yes for whatever is next. To let go, to surrender, to hear against any negativity that nothing is impossible for God. And every morning when we open our eyes to make these words our own: Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. Or to put it more simply: “Yes!”