

On Knowing God's Will For Our Lives
Advent 4, Year B
Luke 1: 26-38
18 December 2011

The art of making strong and clear decisions about important turning points in our lives is one of the more helpful skills that we can acquire. But what makes it possible for people to do this remains a bit of a mystery. The ability to think clearly might be part of it. Also the capacity not to get flustered by sudden, unexpected events – the kind of common sense wisdom that pauses for thought, and doesn't give way to impulsive, panic stricken measures.

Still, there are people who have all these qualities, and who still hesitate and vacillate about what to do next. "I don't know," becomes their catch cry, and sometimes such folk intuitively seek out the company of those who share the dilemma. As one young woman said to me of a former boyfriend, "Finally I found someone who was even more indecisive than me."

The problem is that the future is such an unknown country. It is so hard to extrapolate out from what has just happened to what might happen. Be as rational and calculating as you like about the what might be, and the chances are that you will still be surprised at how things turn out.

How a thirteen-year-old girl was able to cope with, and make sense of, the conversation that the angel Gabriel initiated with her is one of the mysteries of the New Testament. At the age of thirteen I wasn't thinking straight about anything much.

How do we know that Mary was probably thirteen? Because that is the age that most Jewish girls of the

time were betrothed in marriage. The consummation of the marriage usually followed a year later. We find that shockingly early, but remember the ancient world knew nothing of adolescence, or the concept of the teenager. You were a child, and then you were an adult. Every life stage was telescoped and speeded up. Many people's lives were over by the time they reached their thirties or forties, which is why Joseph fades out of the story quite quickly.

What resources would Mary have brought to this conversation? A knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures obviously, but less so than her male contemporaries because only boys were sent to the Synagogue for what we would now call Bible study.

It would seem that Divine providence must have shaped and formed Mary through her family background to prepare her for the extraordinary invitation that would be extended to her on the threshold of adult life. Anglicans blanch at the Roman Catholic doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary because of the blighting view it seems to take of human sexuality, and because of the breath-taking claim that Mary was free of original sin. But what the doctrine is trying to drive at in its saner moments is that Mary was somehow equipped by both inspiring family mentoring and the infusion of Divine grace to have the intuitive capacity to cope with a conversation with God's angelic messenger.

What Mary brings to this conversation that perhaps no one else could of was a kind of intuitive trust that is right at the heart of what we understand religious faith to be. By that I mean a sense of trust that operates at several levels.

Trust in the process of life itself, and in the business of living, and in the structure of reality as we find it. One religious writer helped me to understand this when he wrote that when we launch ourselves down a ski run we are trusting that the laws of gravity won't suddenly change half way down the ski slope, we are trusting that our own reflexes won't let us down, and we are trusting the people who taught us to ski that they gave us good advice and a sufficient training. This kind of trusting enabled Mary to be prepared to take on a tremendous undertaking without knowing where it would all lead to without refusing the risks by sinking in to depression, or by pretending that the invitation had never been issued, or by refusing the challenge through a panic-stricken no. She assumed that the reality of the world was a God-given dimension of human flourishing that she could have confidence in.

At the next level of trusting was the discernment to make a good judgement call that Gabriel was an angel sent from God, and not a deceiving demon sent from the dark side. She had confidence in her assessment of those she met, even if as in this case she was dealing with a kind of being quite different to the human creatures she normally associated with. She didn't run screaming from the encounter, or huddle in a corner until it was all over, or treat Gabriel with an extreme deference that would have ruled out any honest communication. She assumed that he was who he said he was – a messenger from God.

Then at the most important level of trust Mary was prepared to co-operate with God in an unprecedented enterprise that she did not fully understand, and the outcome of which was by no means clear. In fact had she known some of the

heartbreak that would come to her along the way it might have given her pause for thought? This is trust in God at its most elemental. As Cardinal Newman put it in his famous hymn “Lead kindly light,” “I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me.” We are inclined to want a route map given to us of our lives. That is not what was on offer at the Annunciation. Though troubled by all the risky implications of what might come to her Mary was prepared to go with God’s agenda no matter where it might take her.

We live in a time when many self-help gurus are urging us to have life goals and life plans. While a bit of common sense planning for the future never did anyone any harm such a relentless focusing on the making of our own lives seems to assume that we can lay down a grid plan over the unexpectedness of the future that doesn’t seem to tally with the way most of us experience life.

For Christians anyway what counts is the extent to which we can know God’s will for our life. A good spiritual director will be a guide who can help someone to find this pattern in their lives. But any Christian no matter what their circumstances, or their level of spiritual resourcing, can learn a thing or two from today’s extraordinary gospel encounter.

In our decision-making about the future we must trust the fabric of human reality – it isn’t a story told by a idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing. The human story means something, and it is going somewhere. In the words of the *Desiderata*, “with all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams; it is still a beautiful world.”

Then too we must pray for the gift of discernment to see where in the stream of our life’s events God’s

messengers present themselves to us. None of us are left alone without wise counsel and Divine invitation, though often the messengers come in unexpected form. Are the eyes of our heart open to recognise them and to trust them when they present themselves?

Lastly, do we have the courage to take a risk in the face of the uncertainties and the unknowns of the future when God's messengers suggest a new beginning in our lives? Faith isn't the same thing as certainty. Jesus said he was the way, the truth and the life, but sometimes the way can seem pretty bumpy. Discovering God's will for our lives, and keeping on track with it always requires determination, and confidence in him even when we can't see very far ahead in an uncertain situation.

I will leave the last word again to John Henry Newman:

God has created me to do him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission – I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. Somehow I am necessary for his purposes, as necessary in my place as an Archangel in his – if indeed I fail, He can raise another, as He could make the stones children of Abraham. Yet I have a part in His great work: I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do his work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep his commandments and serve him in my calling.

Therefore I will trust him...He knows what He is about.