

Advent 4, December 18, 2011

The story of the annunciation—when the angel, Gabriel, announced to Mary that she would have a very special child—has been one of my favourites for years.

When I was growing up here in Toronto I went to an all-girls Anglican school called St Mildred's College on Walmer Road in the Annex. The school was run by the Community of the Sisters of the church, an international religious order of women that is still based in England, and active in Canada, Australia and the Solomon Islands. I know that a number of parishioners at St Leonard's attended that school in Toronto as I did, and that they remain in regular contact with the Canadian Sisters who have their home in Burlington.

Every day from Monday to Friday when I was in school, a bell would ring at noon, and each of us students would stand still and recite together the prayer known as "the Angelus," which goes like this:

*The angel of the Lord announced unto Mary  
and she conceived by the Holy Ghost.  
"Behold, the handmaid of the Lord,  
be it unto me according to thy word."  
And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us.  
And we beseech thee, o Lord,  
pour thy grace into our hearts, that,  
as we have known the incarnation of thy son Jesus Christ  
by the message of an angel,  
so by his cross and passion  
we may be brought to the glory of his resurrection,  
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

In the grade three classroom there was a painting by Jean-Francois Millet titled "The Angelus," which depicted a French peasant man and a woman stopping to pray in the midst of their work of digging up potatoes in a vast, flat field. They were responding to the call to prayer from church bells that rang out three times per day across the countryside. And they were praying "the angelus" the very one we prayed at school each day. My primary school days were a few years ago, but last week I received a note from one of the graduates from Lawrence Park Collegiate, Dave Rogers, the man with whom Jennifer Orbanic and I originally met to make plans for the service to celebrate LPCI's 75th anniversary at St Leonard's on October 30.

Dave had come across some lyrics for a song titled "Mary, did you know" that was originally written by Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene, and he was so impressed by the words of that song that he sent me the link to them. I think that the words of this song are a perfect complement to the words of the Angelus. Listen to the questions their song poses to Mary...

*Mary, did you know  
 that your baby boy would one day walk on water?  
 Mary, did you know  
 that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?  
 Did you know  
 that your baby boy has come to make you new?  
 This child that you delivered  
 will soon deliver you.*

*Mary, did you know  
 that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?  
 Mary, did you know  
 that your baby boy will calm the storm with his hand?  
 Did you know  
 that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?  
 When you kissed your little baby,  
 you kissed the face of God?*

*Mary did you know  
 the blind will see  
 the deaf will hear.  
 The dead will live again.  
 The lame will leap,  
 the dumb will speak  
 the praises of the lamb.*

*Mary, did you know  
 that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?  
 Mary, did you know  
 that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?*

*Did you know  
 that your baby boy is heaven's perfect lamb?  
 The sleeping child you're holding is the great, "I Am"?*

Think for just a moment about where we would be if Mary had said "No" to the angel, Gabriel.... God became a human being as the result of her, "Yes." God thereby came to save us from sin and death. Mary's, "yes" definitely changed our world for the better.

I know that the story of the annunciation reveals to you and me that God may approach any one of us and ask us to be in a new relationship with God at any time in our lives.

Working with God to do God's will is always a risky business, but, if we, like Mary, accept God's call, God's grace will be poured into our hearts to help us. We simply have to be willing to take the risk and say, as Mary did, "Behold the servant of the Lord, be it unto me according to your word."

By answering God's call in this way, you and I may have the opportunity to change the world for the better, in a different, but yet, no less wonderful way.