

Trinity College Cambridge

22 January 2012

Scenes from the Life of Christ: Annunciation

Luke 1: 26–38

The Annunciation: The Mérode Altarpiece, The Master of Flémalle

Michael Banner

An annunciation. You have all seen hundreds of pictures of annunciations. We all suffer from what I saw referred to recently as ‘semiotic overload’ – an excess of signs, symbols and images, which bombard us day by day, in books, on television screens, on billboards, on laptops and so on. Even were you to see the picture I have chosen for yourselves, hanging as it now does in the Cloisters museum in New York, you might merely look it over very quickly or simply overlook it – just one amongst several dozen pictures of about the same period hanging side by side on the walls, an annunciation here, a virgin and child there, Christ on the cross several times – and so on. I can feel a rush for the gift shop coming on, or even for all those shops on Fifth Avenue. But before you do that, I want you to stand in front of this picture with me for a few minutes and try to look at it through new eyes. Imagine not that you are in New York in 2012, but that you are somewhere in Flanders in 1425 when the paint on this picture is still wet – and imagine that as you go back to 1425, you forget all the other pictures and images which fill your head, so that you are not only seeing this painting for the very first time, but seeing it as it might have been seen for the first time in 1425 – by someone not suffering from semiotic overload.

With your newly innocent eyes, you will be shocked by this picture. Now, you will know straight away that you are seeing the annunciation. There is an angelic messenger and a young woman, the regular and non-negotiable components of the annunciation. But of course, since the story from Luke’s Gospel gives us only the characters and a conversation, there is nothing to determine how any artist will visualise and depict the fuller scene. No painter ever had a full script or brief to determine how to realise the encounter between Gabriel and Mary. There quickly developed, nonetheless, conventional ways of conceiving the scene – our painter however – sometimes referred to as the Master of Flémalle, sometimes said to be Roger Campin, but no one knows for sure – has boldly struck out on his own in a number of ways against that tradition, so that whilst in 2012 wandering through the gallery you might be a bit bored by it, in 1425 you would more likely have been shocked by what you see.

First of all, you would find the picture revolutionary in terms of its artistic technique. We can see this at once simply by putting it side by side with a fresco of the annunciation from San Marco, Florence, painted by Fra Angelico. That fresco dates from probably 10 or 15 years later than the Altarpiece, but is pretty representative of the sort of imagery found in frescos, panels and in manuscript illuminations from the early 1400s.

Next to our picture, it seems to come from another, and previous age. The Master of Flemalle, or Roger Campin or whoever, is one of a group referred to as the Flemish or Netherlandish Primitivists – though there seems nothing primitive here. These Flemish painters made astonishing discoveries regarding the depiction of light, volume and weight – discoveries which achieve their greatest effects in the work of Jan van Eyck, whose Arnolfini Marriage of 1434 you can see in the National Gallery in London.¹ I had better not dwell on these technicalities, but suffice to say that the picture in front of us already shows us the possibility of a new and really quite breath-taking realism as against the flat and rather dull work which precedes it. Seeing a painting by one of these painters for the first time in the 1420s is perhaps equivalent to seeing colour television for the first time in the mid-sixties.

But back in 1425 it wouldn't be only the technique which you would notice – not just 'how' the picture is painted, but also 'what' is painted, will strike you. The new technique allows the artist to present the world with a new and revolutionary realism; but, in addition, our artist is interested in another sort of realism, and this depends not on how he paints but on what he paints. And by what he paints he aims to domesticate the annunciation and bring it firmly down to earth, so as to make it as real as can be.

To notice this, we need to take note of something we can very easily miss, but would not be missed by a contemporary viewer. What we have here is an interior; so much is obvious to us. What we won't know without some further information is this is what one distinguished critic describes as the 'first true modern interior'² in the history of art. True interiors are unknown prior to the 1420s when this picture is painted – previously when someone is shown inside a building, it is by means of a cut away, cross section technique, so that we see the exterior along with the interior. We have the sort of view of the interior which we get if we take the front off a doll's house. Annunciations had been located in various spaces, in grand classical loggias, in gardens, court yards, ruined temples or oratories, even sometimes in knowing anachronisms, in churches – but never, whatever the setting, in true interiors. The painter here, however, gives us a room in a way it has never been seen before – as if from the inside. And all at once, for the first time, we are brought dramatically up close, in to the very midst of this intimate moment. Previously people have looked on at annunciations – now we are present at it.

But there is another way in which the previous role of the viewer as mere spectator is subverted by the painter – for as well as placing us in the midst of this newly private and newly intimate moment, he has particularised and specified the interior so that the space we enter is very definitely our own. The interior is, in fact, a perfectly regular domestic room of its day, the fittings and fixtures of which amount to 'an inventory of the furnishings in a late-gothic home'³: an adjustable bench with Mary seated on the foot rest, a folding

¹ Light is now for the first time understood and displayed as the ground of colour; and from sculpture, these painters discover the volume of figures; and third, they have learnt how to root their people to the ground.

² O. Pächt, *Van Eyck and the Founders of Early Netherlandish Painting*, trans. D. Britt (London, 1994), 50.

³ D. de Vos, *The Flemish Primitives* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), 33.

oval table, a fire screen, brass candle sticks, a kettle or cauldron hanging in an alcove over a basin, a rack with towels, a jug on the table serving as a vase for that single lily stem, a book (probably a Book of Hours), resting on a velvet or silk bag on the table, a prayer roll under that book, and yet another book in Mary's hand, with the sheet-like covering which would wrap and protect it. (So perhaps not just any 'late-gothic home', but a rather bookish one.) The point is, however, that the bookish Mary is sitting in a regular room as it would have looked when the picture was fresh off the easel. The effect of seeing this picture new painted, we can grasp by updating the picture to 2012, and imagine Mary now in a sitting room we could all recognise as just an everyday, domestic interior – there would be, very probably, a sofa (not the bench), with a couple of arm chairs, a coffee table, a wide screen tv instead of a fire place, some lamps or spotlights, some pictures on the wall, some framed photographs on a mantelpiece, curtains at the windows, some CDs, a lap-top or an ipad or perhaps both where the Book of Hours sits open, and a Kindle in Mary's hands.

The Master of Flémalle and the other Flemish realists 'took [biblical] scenes remote in place and time' and, as one critic puts it, 'almost literally brought them home to the viewer, into his own life, his own age and his own milieu. Legendary events were depicted as if they had just happened, or were still happening, at the moment when the painter recorded them, and in the places best known to him and his public'. 'Christ in Flanders' is how that critic terms the trend – what it amounts to here is Gabriel and Mary in 'the living room of a Flemish bourgeois house'.⁴ 500 years later Stanley Spencer will attempt a similar thing – not Christ in Flanders, of course, but Christ in Cookham. The effect is the same – the biblical events are taking place in a street, in a home, near you.

But this is not all. There is another choice which the artist has made in depicting the annunciation, which further serves the purpose of making the scene more regular, more everyday, more mundane. We shall need to look quite closely – somewhat more closely than the scholar, writing about this work, who tells us that 'the Virgin Mary looks up from an open book . . . interrupted in her reading by the Angel Gabriel.'⁵ But she is definitely not interrupted and she does not look up. Gabriel has entered the room very quietly – with only the faintest of breezes, perhaps from the flapping of those wings, just enough to extinguish the candle and cause the pages of the book on the table to flutter. But he has entered so very quietly that he is unnoticed, and Mary remains quietly engrossed in her book.

Very unusually indeed, the painter has chosen not to depict one of the two moments which are normally depicted, the moments of drama in the story. In the first moment Mary is perturbed – 'she was troubled and wondered what sort of greeting this might be'. In the second, she assents to her newly revealed vocation – 'behold the handmaid of the Lord'. And depictions of Mary typically choose one or other moment: so she is either disturbed, perplexed, quizzical, concerned, at a loss, mystified, thrown, baffled or confounded by Gabriel's salutation; or, at the conclusion to the conversation, she is accepting, resolved,

⁴ Pächt, *Van Eyck and the Founders of Early Netherlandish Painting*, 66.

⁵ M.W. Driver, 'Mirrors of a Collective Past: Re-considering Images of Medieval Women', 75, in *Women and the Book* (British Library, 1997).

humble, compliant, modestly giving her consent to the divine calling, sometimes a touch fearful. Our artist has chosen neither of those two obvious moments – and instead has Mary quietly unaware. She doesn't even notice at all, and we only just, the baby Christ who enters through the unopened window as he will enter the unopened womb. The conception of Christ is going on with barely more than a mild breeze to flap the pages, and our angel is, at least for the moment, invisible. Mary sticks to her book.

So what is going on here? Why has our artist not only brought us into an interior, but a contemporary interior, and on top of that, has chosen a moment in the story which almost no artist before or since has picked? Standing before this picture with the eyes of the painter's contemporaries we would surely wonder what this realistic, interior and private, modernised annunciation is all about – an annunciation which overlooks those dramatic moments when Mary is either deeply perplexed or humbly assenting – and chooses instead to bring us up close to Mary lost in her reading?

It has to be said that the general domesticating tendency in the Flemish painters of this period – the 'Christ in Flanders' motif – has rather troubled or perplexed commentators, who have offered diametrically opposed accounts of what is going on – though I'm inclined to think that the whole truth is found in neither of the alternatives we are given.

On the one hand, some see this domesticating as a symptom of a secularising trend which uses religious themes as a mere pretext for 'depicting everyday objects that had yet to establish themselves as suitable subjects in their own right'⁶; it is as if, on this account, what these painters really wanted to do was to paint a still life, or a Vermeer, but having arrived on the scene 200 years too early, have to content themselves with painting religious scenes, and doing so grudgingly, making them as secular as possible.

Others, on the opposite side of the controversy (such as Panofsky), see the everyday realism in these painters as a façade, behind which lies a profound and secret religious iconography, even when the subject is not in any way obviously a religious one. The high water mark of this approach is Panofsky's elaborate, not to say baroque, interpretation of van Eyck's Arnolfini Wedding, which sees the everyday objects and articles in these pictures as replete with various religious messages which it is our task to decipher or decode. Thus, for example, a candle is never just a candle but a sign of the light of the world; a cauldron or basin is never for washing but signifies the washing away of sins; shoes are never thrown aside because, well, that is what we do with shoes, but because we are meant to think of the command to Moses – 'take off the shoes from thy feet, for the ground on which you stand is holy ground'.

As a way of approaching the pictures of this period, and indeed of any other period, these alternatives look limited, even if neither is simply and straightforwardly wrong. It is perhaps best to say that theologically speaking, they look distinctly limited if they are taken to exhaust the options for depicting the religious – as if to be present to the world, the religious, or the divine, must either be blatantly mythological, so to say (with as many angels and flashes of light and heavenly choirs as you can muster on the canvas,

⁶ Pächt, *Van Eyck and the Founders of Early Netherlandish Painting*, 56.

for without them we have only the secular), or if it is not present in that fashion, must lie behind the everyday secular world in some sort of cryptic, da Vinci code, fashion. It is as if, on these alternatives, the religious is either a very heavy layer on top of the world we know, or is somehow mysteriously concealed behind it, like some cryptic puzzle. It is either above the surface, or below the surface, but never on the surface.

I think our painter knows better than this – and that in his ‘humanization of sacred history’, as Pacht terms it, he is choosing neither in favour of anti-religious secularising, nor meaning to maintain the religious through some arcane system of signs and signals: what we might think of as metaphysical nudges and winks. For even though it seems that almost no one previously chose to treat the annunciation as he does by isolating this particular moment, and almost no one followed him afterwards, I don’t think that we should say he is making a mistake, as one critic has it. Our painter, so I think, is not making a mistake, but a point and a rather important one.

By this domesticating realism, by locating the annunciation in a real bourgeois home of 1425 and taking us into the interior of this home, and by taking one step further still, picking the moment in the story when the religious is unobtrusively and quietly present, our painter has turned The Annunciation into An Annunciation – not for the sake of trivialising the scene, but for sake of universalising it. He has presented the event of Annunciation as a real and regular moment, not as an exceptional one. A young woman, bible or prayer book in hand, is lost in her thoughts, and on the verge of being addressed by a divine word. She will conceive this divine word, and in conceiving it, the divine will become flesh. But as our painter gives us this scene, it is no longer merely a particular, however important, event in Palestine, 2000 years ago. This is no longer an unprecedented and unrepeatable and exceptional moment of divine action. Instead, what we are invited in to see is a form of God’s general engagement with the world – happening in sitting rooms in Flanders or Cookham or Cambridge, as well as in Palestine – in which to each of us the divine, the religious, is announced, quietly and unobtrusively; in which each of us may conceive the divine in our hearts, which word may, being conceived, become flesh in each and every one of our lives.

With the eyes of 1425 you see a quiet, immediate and extraordinary moment of annunciation and conception in a sitting room like your own; because, so the artist is telling us, this is how and where the religious is present day by day. The divine, the religious, is not only to be thought and found above the surface of the world in the spectacular of mythology, nor is it below the surface of the world, hidden in some cryptic clues accessible only to those who can solve mystic crosswords. The religious, the very coming of God into the world, occurs in real times, in real places, in the everyday, and on its surface. What happened is what happens – and in depicting what happens in a new and dramatic and universal and immediate way so that the annunciation becomes an annunciation, the picture intends not only to shock. Just as much it invites and challenges us to imagine our conceiving God in the flesh ourselves – and indeed invites and challenges us so to conceive him.