

## Advent 4

Last Sunday, I was in Rome, and found myself toying with the idea that I was a space alien sent to investigate the religious beliefs of earthlings. Unable to read their language I had only their visual images to work on—so what would I have concluded? Probably that these particular earthlings worshipped many gods but that two had a special role in their lives. One was a young man usually shown being tortured to death but sometimes rising through the sky displaying the wounds inflicted during his torture. The other was a young woman, beautiful, but in an innocent, child-like and totally non-sexual way, and with a sad, faraway expression on her face. Occasionally these two figures could be seen together with an elderly bearded god, accompanied by a dove.

Christian art has a lot to answer for, and without the contexts of teaching and explanation, our alien anthropologist in Rome would produce a very peculiar account of Christianity.

Could he read, he would have come to a very different view. Mary is not the object of Christian worship, although, despite the perils of religious art, Catholicism is largely right in maintaining and Protestantism largely wrong in rejecting the view that Mary is and should be a central figure in the Christian story of human beings' God-relationship.

Today our cycle of readings direct us to the stories of how, as the Scottish poet Edwin Muir wrote, 'the angel and the girl are met'. Let us, then, consider Mary: inspiration, example, and companion in our Christian life, pioneer of what it is for a human being to receive God as a word made flesh, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. And, in case you think I have something against the artists, I shall now turn to

an artist to help us not just to hear but to see what Mary might mean for us today. The artist in question is one of the great British sculptors of the last fifty years, Elisabeth Frink, and the work I want us to meditate on is her life-size bronze sculpture of 'the Walking Madonna', which some of you may have seen in the Close of Salisbury Cathedral.

And it seems right to turn to an artist, because what we are trying to think about is a kind of meeting that has everything to do with the power of the word but also everything to do with how the word is most powerful when it is more than word, when it discloses sighs and groans too deep for words and opens our eyes to truths that rise up from the pre-verbal depths of embodied life. This is a meeting in which, beyond words, as Muir went on to write, 'see,/ while the destroying minutes flow,/ each reflects the other's face/ till heaven in hers and earth in his/ shine steady there'.

So. The Walking Madonna. A figure very different from the pretty, innocent, sad Madonna of popular Christian art. This Madonna is no girl, but an adult woman, a real woman, stepping out with a firm and energetic stride. She may already have been on the road for many miles, as women in first-century Palestine walked many miles in a day for water, for the market, or to visit relatives. Looking at her, we almost feel the heat beating down and the dust swirling about her feet. Her bearing is strong and upright. She looks like someone who has had to face up to many adversities but has not been beaten down by them, and we might well imagine her singing as—before the days of personal music systems—people used to sing as they marched across the land. Her head is slightly bowed, her face lean and angular and she has a steady and unwavering eye, directed not on the impossible focus of her unseen destination but on the next few steps she has to take.

Which moment of Mary's life has Elisabeth Frink chosen to show us? Perhaps, as only an artist can, she has shown us several key moments in a single image. So, we can see her walking gladly towards the meeting with her cousin Elisabeth, the song of joy we call The Magnificat swelling up in her heart. Or perhaps she is journeying towards Bethlehem, part

of the great crowd flocking to be registered, but alone with the secret and the mystery of the coming birth. She could be on the road into exile in Egypt, that hard road walked in company with all the dispossessed and displaced persons of history.

Or do we see her as she follows in her son's footsteps, even to the place of his terrible execution? Or is she walking in resurrection light into a world in which all things are made new?

Journeying from place to place, she is also journeying in time, and, like all journeys in time, hers too leads into an unknown future. Unknown? Yes, for neither she nor we have yet grasped all that this 'new thing' might mean. Unknown? Not entirely, for she has been warned that a sword will pierce her own heart. This walking Madonna surely knows that whatever else awaits her will bring with it grief and pain, grief and pain that are more than and other than the grief and pain to which all flesh is heir. But this does not cause her to hesitate in her stride. She goes steadily forward. Where does she get such strength, such purpose?

Is she just a naturally courageous person, one of those lucky ones endowed with a fighting spirit, up for anything the world may throw at them? Is she more than this, an adventurer, ready and eager for any enterprise, no matter how dangerous, seeking a life less ordinary, maybe a life touched by greatness? Perhaps. But if this is so, then she probably can't help the rest of us who aren't made that way and whose natural response to any more than average test is fear, anxiety, and dread.

No. I prefer to see her as one who, like us, knows fear and dread—why else would the angel assure her 'Fear not!' Nor is the challenge she goes to meet simply a trial of strength, pitting

herself against the dangers that lie ahead. Because it is one thing to be courageous when all you are risking is you own life and limb: it is something else again when the courage you have to find is to witness and to bear and to console the sufferings of others—in this case the cruel and terrible sufferings of the one she most dreads seeing suffer, the one who is flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone, life of her life. This is the courage that gives her compassion for the depths of all human suffering!

And yet she doesn't hesitate in her stride. Where does she get her assurance from? How, knowing of the sword that will pierce her own heart, can she go so steadily, so unwaveringly towards the unknown future that awaits her beyond the ever-darkening horizon?

Perhaps it is because she remembers the greeting of the angel 'Hail, the Lord is with you; you are to be blessed among women'? Perhaps it is because she remembers the angel's words, the greeting, the grace, the song—for how can angels speak except in song?—the angel's promise of a word in which all flesh, innocent and guilty, would be gathered up into the glory of God? Perhaps it is because she remembers the angel's heaven reflected in her face and her earthly face reflected in heaven, even while the destroying minutes flowed?

Then her steady stride is not the manifestation of courage or will-power, her purposeful look not accompanied by the gritted teeth of the fighter or the roar of the adventurer. She goes forward as she does because she remembers the angel's words, the greeting, the grace, the song—the gift. And, going as she does, her life, her inspiration, her example, her companionship become a gift to us.

I have imagined her singing as she goes. But what might be her song? Edwin Muir, whom I cited before, wrote three poems on the Annunciation. Here are the opening words of

another of these, words that perhaps give us a hint as to what we might call Mary's marching song: 'Now in this iron reign/ I sing the liberty/ Where each asks from each/ What each most wants to give/ And each awakes in each/ What else would never be,/ Summoning so the rare/ Spirit to breathe and live'.

We are, of course, still in Advent—symbolically, still walking in darkness, though dawn is in the sky; still in the 'iron reign' of force and necessity, a world dominated by 'man's inhumanity'—or simple indifference—'to man', a world in which we must suffer and, worse, see those we love pointlessly suffer and perish. Yet even now we can 'sing the liberty' of God's coming presence among us, and what words—though it is a reality beyond words—can better describe the effects of that coming presence than God asking of us what we most want to give and we asking of God what God most wants to give, and each, divine and human, and you and I, awaking in each 'what else would never be', this 'new thing' that is coming to pass. Let us, then, follow Mary, inspiration, example, and companion, into our future, whatever it may be, and, as we go, let us too remember the angel's song, the greeting, and the grace that are ours, even in this 'iron reign'.