



*The Evangelist Luke depicted as a winged bull.  
Ceramic by Adam Kossowski in St. Joseph's Chapel, Aylesford Priory, Kent, England.*

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## SECTION THREE:

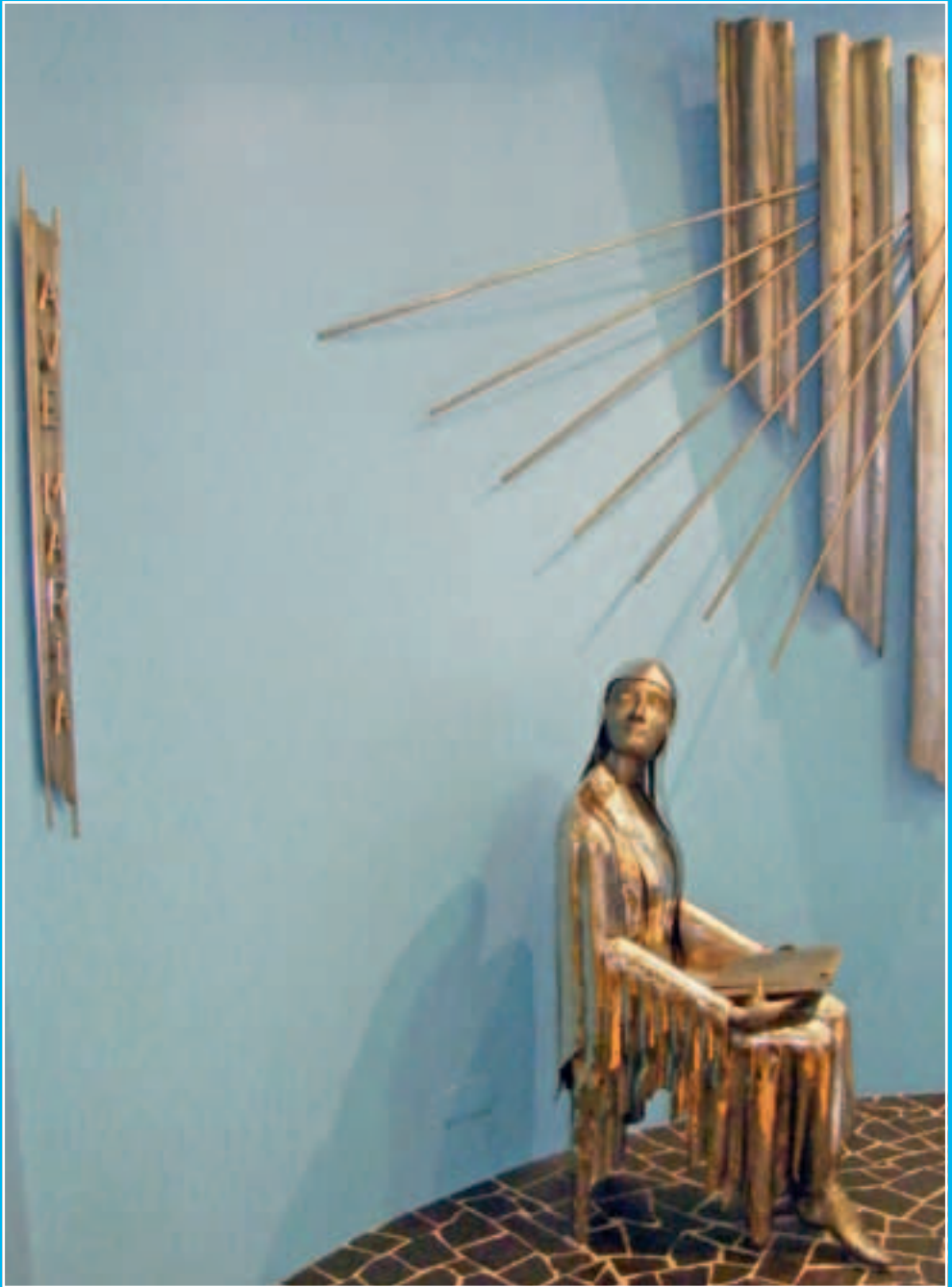
# Mary in the Gospel of Luke

The Gospel according to Luke is part one of a two-part work. The second part is the *Acts of the Apostles*. Tradition tells us that Luke was a companion of Saint Paul on some of his missionary journeys. The large majority of the people for whom he wrote were Gentiles (not Jews). Luke seems to have used Mark's Gospel extensively, but he uses the material in quite a different way, according to his own notable abilities as a story teller. He also used some material that may have been available to Matthew too, as well as some independent sources. A date in the mid-80s A.D. seems likely for the writing of the Gospel.

Luke was probably a Gentile but was very knowledgeable about the Bible. He was writing for Christians of the second generation living outside of Palestine, in contact with a culture and religion different from those within which Jesus operated.

Each Gospel writer has his own particular approach to Jesus, and we must try to hold all of these together and not try to make them all say exactly the same thing. Each Gospel has particular insights that we must not lose. Luke presents Jesus as the compassionate saviour sent to seek and save the lost. The religious leaders reject Jesus, but a small group of disciples are commissioned by the Risen Lord to proclaim the Gospel, and how they do this is detailed in the *Acts of the Apostles*. A great part of the Gospel of Luke is taken up with Jesus' journey to Jerusalem to be crucified, and where he would rise again from the dead. Then, from Jerusalem, the disciples moved out to the ends of the earth and even to the centre of the great empire – Rome itself. The second part of the journey motif is to be found in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

The infancy narratives have no parallel in the other Gospels. While Matthew emphasises the role of Joseph, Luke chooses to stress that of Mary. The genealogy is quite different from that of Matthew, except that they both claim to be that of Joseph. Luke tells us that Jesus was the son, as was supposed, of Joseph (3:23). Luke's portrayal of Mary is a striking example of an important element in the Gospel, that God reverses the poverty and powerlessness of the human condition. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Mary is portrayed in a positive light as obedient to the Lord (1:39-56; 2:24, 51). Luke uses Our Lady's name "**Mary**" 12 times, always in the infancy narratives (1:27, 30, 34, 38, 39, 41, 46, 56; 2:5, 16, 19, 34). She is also referred to 7 times as "**the mother of Jesus**" (1:43; 2:33, 34, 48, 51; 8:19, 20).



*The Annunciation, sculpted by Simon Robison in 2005,  
at Whitefriar Street Carmelite Centre, Dublin.*

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## REFLECTION 6

# THE VOCATION OF MARY

*Luke 1:26-38*

### Opening Prayer

*O God, you prepared and called Mary to be the Mother of your Son, and she accepted your will with joy. You have a plan for me. Help me to listen to your Word and welcome it into my life. Amen.*

### Text

Read attentively the following Bible text for the first time in order to get an idea of the overall sense and to take in the details. The version used for this passage is the *New International Version (NIV)*, a translation made by more than 100 scholars in contemporary English.<sup>18</sup> It was reviewed and revised by several groups. The goals for the translation were that it be accurate, beautiful, clear and dignified, and that it be suitable both for public and private reading.

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end." <sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth

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<sup>18</sup> *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright © International Bible Society, 1973, 1978, 1984, used by permission; all rights reserved.

month. <sup>37</sup> For nothing is impossible with God.” <sup>38</sup> “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

## Read

This is the famous scene of ‘the Annunciation’. It has inspired some of the world’s greatest artists. The infancy narrative as a whole is a Gospel in miniature, and a statement of themes that will be developed as the later mission of Jesus unfolds. Luke writes of two annunciations and two births – of John the Baptist and of Jesus. They are compared and contrasted. Can you spot some of the differences between the annunciation to Zechariah of the birth of John the Baptist (*Luke* 1:5-25) and the annunciation to Mary of the birth of Jesus? The annunciations draw upon the pattern of similar events in the Old Testament: the births of Ishmael (*Genesis* 16:7-13), Isaac (*Genesis* 7:1-3, 15-21; 18:1-2, 10-15), and Samson (*Judges* 13:2-23). It is clear that while John will be great, Jesus will be immeasurably greater.

At the Annunciation, God’s promises to King David were fulfilled in an unimaginable way. The kingdom that Jesus would establish was not political but a spiritual reality that would last forever. Jesus is not to have a human father but instead he will be Son of God.

As well as being the story of the annunciation of a wonderful birth, it is also the story of Mary’s vocation. She is invited to play a part in God’s plan of salvation. The first word of the angel to Mary, which in the translation used here is rendered as “Greetings”, can mean simply “hello” or it could also mean “rejoice”. It seems very likely that Luke wants to impart the idea of an invitation to joy. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the same word is used to invite the people to rejoice in the salvation that is coming from God (cf. *Zephaniah* 3:14-15). The joy that was announced by the prophets to Israel at the coming of the Messiah is focused on one particular woman, Mary, who unites in herself the hopes of the people.

The next words of the angel, given in the *New International Version* of the Bible as “you who are highly favoured”, have been debated among scholars for many years. It certainly seems that the essential point is that Mary has been transformed by the free action of God (the grace of God) in order to prepare her for her unique mission. The second part of what the angel says, “The Lord is with you”, is quite common in the Old Testament. However, it is only used when a command is being issued that is difficult to accomplish, or impossible

for a human being (e.g. *Exodus* 3:12). The words extend the promise of God’s help in particularly difficult missions. In our text it is aimed at a woman who will give birth. This is always miraculous, but is something that women around the world do every day. The specific assistance of God in the case of Mary is because she will give birth without the intervention of a man. In this case perhaps we can appreciate why Mary was “**greatly troubled**”.

The angel tells Mary not to be afraid because she is specially favoured by God, and the child to whom she will give birth will be great, the Son of the Most High God. He will be the fulfilment of all the promises made by God in the Old Testament. Mary then asks a question about how this is going to happen given the fact that she is a virgin. Like most things in the Bible, there are arguments over the meaning. Some people think that the question is simply a way to move the story on, so that the angel can introduce the miraculous announcement of a virgin birth. Other experts think there is much more to Mary’s question, and suggest that it refers to a hidden desire she had to remain a virgin, despite the fact she was legally married to Joseph (though they had not as yet come to live together and share their life). What the angel says next gives a solution to her desire, despite the expectations of her society, for she will be a mother while remaining a virgin.

The “**overshadowing**” of Mary by God could be an allusion to the cloud (a symbol of God) which covered the tent of the Covenant (*Exodus* 40:35). The angel tells Mary that nothing is impossible for God. This covers the fact of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, for whom it seemed impossible to have a child, as well as the fact that Mary will remain a virgin while becoming a mother.

The acceptance of Mary is a joyous desire that God’s will be accomplished in her. She wishes to collaborate totally with God. The joy at the end of this scene corresponds to the invitation to joy at the beginning.

## Reflect

Read again the text of *Luke* 1:26-38.

Go through the story again and notice all the details – when, where, who? The angel Gabriel has already appeared in the Gospel of Luke. Where and what did he say, and to whom? What do you think the angel Gabriel means by his words to Mary: “**you who are highly favoured**” and “**The Lord is with you**”? Why do

you think Mary was troubled? What do you think it means to say that Mary has found favour with God? If it is true that Mary somehow had the desire or felt called to live as a virgin, yet was going through with a normal marriage to Joseph, what does it say about her disposition at the time of the Annunciation? She certainly was not going to spring this on Joseph as a little surprise when he took her into his home. She waited in the darkness of faith for God to reveal the divine will to her. What do you think Mary felt when the angel left her?

To make the reflection more personal, I suggest some further questions that you might like to consider. Remember that there are no right and wrong answers, and this is not an exam. Do not worry if you take a long time over one question or cannot answer another. The important thing is to listen to what God might be saying to you through this text of Scripture.

1. How does God communicate with you?
2. What do you think God is saying to you?
3. What is your part in God's plan?
4. How can you co-operate more fully with God?

### Respond

The purpose of all prayer is to encourage a personal response to God, who always takes the initiative. Having expended some thought on the text, and on what God might be saying to you through it, now is the time to open your heart and communicate directly with the One who loves you beyond anything you could imagine. The prayer below might help you get started, but if you do not need it, even better.

*Rejoice, you by whom joy will shine forth!*  
*Rejoice, you by whom malediction will cease!*  
*Rejoice, you who raise up the fallen Adam!*  
*Rejoice, you who dry the tears of Eve!*  
*Rejoice, you who are the inaccessible summit of human thought!*  
*Rejoice, you the impenetrable abyss even for the eyes of angels!*  
*Rejoice, because you are the throne of the great King!*  
*Rejoice, for you are the one who bears all things!*  
*Rejoice, announcing star of the sun!*  
*Rejoice, womb of the divine incarnation!*

*Rejoice, you by whom creation is renewed!  
Rejoice, you by whom and in whom the Creator is adored!*<sup>19</sup>

## Rest

The mission of Jesus was to open the way for human beings to share in the life of God (2 Peter 1:4). There is also the startling statement of the great defender of Christian truth, Saint Athanasius (296-373): “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God”.<sup>20</sup> Mary’s vocation was to co-operate with God in this great work. She joyfully accepted her role, even though she could not foresee where it would lead her. Each of us has a unique vocation to become the child of God that we have been created to be. In our human uniqueness, God expresses the divine presence in an unrepeatable way. This is possible because the Son of God came into the world as one of us, to raise us up to participate in God’s life.

The Christian contemplative tradition was largely ignored for several hundred years, for a number of historical reasons, but has recently undergone a resurgence of interest. More and more people are seeking to tune in to the presence of God, which is the ground of all being. New contemplative prayer groups are being founded, and many books are being written to help people deepen their relationship with God. Contemplation is not a technique to be learned; it is a gift to be received. However, there are ways to prepare the soil to receive the seed so that it produces a hundredfold (cf. *Mark* 4:8, 20; *Luke* 8:8). John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way of the Lord, and there are things that we can do as we wait for God. The gift of contemplation is not reserved for holy people, but normally it is facilitated if the individual is in fact seeking God. By ‘seeking God’ I do not mean looking for something outside, but expressing a desire to be in union with God. The words of Our Lady at the end of the Annunciation scene can express well this desire: “*May it be to me as you have said*” (*Luke* 1:38). This is not a passive resignation to the will of someone more powerful; it is the joyful cry of co-operation in the great work that God wishes to accomplish in and through her.

God desires to bring about a wonderful work in you. You can ignore this vocation, or fight it, or deny it, or you can joyfully co-operate with God. If you choose to co-operate with God, you will normally begin by putting your house

<sup>19</sup> A part of the 6<sup>th</sup>- or 7<sup>th</sup>-century Greek hymn, the *Akathiste*, composed originally for the feast of the Annunciation.

<sup>20</sup> See article 460 in the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman / Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, and subsequent publishers) for this and other similar quotes.



in order a little, in the sense that you will turn away from anything that is clearly against God's will. You will have spent some time in trying to discover more and more about God from the Scriptures. You will also normally seek to spend time in prayer, which is the way to grow in your relationship with God. Prayer is a relationship with God and is an intensely personal journey. However, just as there are various guidelines for human relationships, there are also similar guidelines for the human/divine relationship. It is unlikely that you will have a very successful human relationship if you talk all the time, and do not give the other person an opportunity to speak. Also in the relationship with God there is a time for talking and a time for silence.

Silence can be difficult, especially for modern men and women, and so the ways of Christian prayer that are being taught nowadays focus very much on how to remain in silence. Most of these ways of prayer have strong roots in the Christian contemplative tradition, and seek to make known the riches contained there, but they also introduce some elements aimed at the situation in which we find ourselves today. A recent book on the practice of contemplation seeks to teach some skills "by which we learn to dispose ourselves to surrender and thus to discover this uncharted land".<sup>21</sup> The author writes about the use of a prayer word or phrase to help the mind remain in the presence of God rather than flitting about all over the place.

Perhaps there is a word or a phrase that comes to you from your own relationship with God that might help you. If not, I suggest using "Lord", or "Father", or "Jesus", or "Spirit". There are various ways that one can use a prayer word. I prefer to use it in order to refocus the heart when you find yourself wandering. It can remind you of your intention, which is to be in God's presence. Enter into a period of silence now and see whether your prayer word helps you to remain with your heart fixed on God. Let this prayer word bring you back to God when you are following other thoughts.

### Act

Throughout your day be aware that God may be communicating with you in the small events. Seek to co-operate with God's plan of salvation for humanity in the humdrum of your life.

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Laird, O.S.A., *Into The Silent Land: The Christian Practice of Contemplation*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006), p. 3.





*The Visitation, painted by Edward Ardizzone,  
at the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Faversham, Kent, England.*