

St Luke's in the City

Celebrating at the Crossroads

4th Sunday in Advent, 23 December 2007

Dear Friends,

There is an aspect of the story of Mary's virginal conception, as told by Luke, which I have never seen pictured. Images of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary abound. Likewise, images of Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem via donkey transport (no Biblical support for this image!) and of Mary in manger scenes abound. But what happens between the moment of that angelic announcement and the moment of the stages of labour? Gabriel announces that the Divine Spirit will do something, but we never see that something being done, we only see the consequence – the birth of Mary's child. Between the promise and the realisation there is a Biblical silence. Actually, St Luke gives us just one clue, only one word. The word is *ἐπισκιάζω* *episkiazō*, a verb which means 'to overshadow'. Here is an action word par excellence! Mary protests to Gabriel that it's going to be impossible for her to conceive in her womb and bear a son since she 'does not know a man'. Gabriel's response is likely to be so familiar - as a consequence of the Christmas story having been domesticated, sentimentalised and packaged up for children's pantomimes - that we hardly notice the shock of it. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power (*δύναμις* *dunamis*, from which is derived the word dynamite!) of the Most High will overshadow (*episkiazō*) you. The biblical text makes no attempt to say any more about what being overshadowed might look and feel like to Mary. While artists have tried a hundred ways of depicting the Holy Spirit visiting Mary, the terror of being overshadowed is apparently un-photographable. Silence! But Luke does give us one more clue about the terror of this being overshadowed – he uses the same word in chapter 9 in the account of the Transfiguration. While Peter is prattling on to Jesus about how nice it would be to build three tents, for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, a Divine cloud overshadows (*episkiazō*) them, and they were very afraid!

Hope is not an heroic act of Mary's will, and neither can it be for us. Advent's great theme of hope in God's coming among us is not something we can talk ourselves into. Hope is God's gift, announced to us by the whole army of God's angelic visitors in all their diverse manifestations, bearing fruit in spite of our protests, our fears and reluctance. The biblical text also makes it perfectly clear that hope is the work of the Spirit in the midst of the necessary overshadowing by the dynamite power of the Divine. Christian hope is not wishfulness, but conscious surrender to this dynamite.

With my love,
David