

Some words for our Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Week 9 – I am the handmaid of the Lord

*‘The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame
“All hail” said he “thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady,” Gloria, Gloria’¹*



Reading:

Luke 1:26-38

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph’s & St Charles,

Our meditation on the Seven Sorrows of Mary has concluded and so for our final week we may take this opportunity to briefly consider Our Lady as the handmaid of the Lord; that pivotal declaration of service from which all her joys and sorrows flowed.

The 1901 census revealed that there were over one-and-a-half-million people employed in domestic service in Britain, with most of them living in the same home as their employer. If the world of *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey* has passed there remains a small but significant market for such a service, especially in London, where so many of the uber-wealthy have chosen to make (one of) their homes there. Even if we are fortunate to have the ‘help’ come in for one morning a week or so ,

most of our great- and great-great-grandparents, be they either rich or poor, would have immediately understood what a handmaid was and what she did in a way that most of us do not.

I recall the actress Siân Phillips speaking once about her role as the wicked scheming Roman empress Livia, in the BBC classic series, *I, Claudius*, and how she had struggled at first, in a number of her scenes, to ignore the people who were playing her slaves. It should appear that you think nothing of them, the director instructed her; they are doing their job, you should hardly notice they are there. Thank God that for most of us, it takes a considerable act of the imagination to think of someone as no more than a domestic appliance – liable to breakdown and require replacing at some point. However, we should be wary of taking our understanding of a handmaid from television, as HBO's adaptation of Margaret Lockwood's, dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale* proves. Yes in the biblical world many handmaids would also have been slaves, but it is certain that not all were. It is good that the working conditions of domestic service will have certainly improved for so many – though the murky world of human-trafficking makes it clear it is by no means all – but what remains pretty much unchanged is that it is some level of personal service that is required. I confess that I gained a little insight into this world, as my own time at Bishop's House would see me morph not just from priest to private secretary but also to chauffeur, butler, valet and footman; all according to what was needed at the time.

In lifting his eyes to the Lord in the heavens, the psalmist says, *'my eyes, like the eyes of slaves on the hands of their lords. Like the eyes of a servant on the hands of her mistress, so our eyes are on the Lord our God.'*² As Montaigne memorably noted, *'And what about our hands? With them we request, promise, summon, dismiss, menace, pray, supplicate, refuse, question ... keep silent and what not else, with a variety and multiplicity rivalling the tongue.'*³ The handmaid is literally 'ready at hand' to serve the needs of her master. Here we glimpse something of the faith of Mary, for whatever her daily tasks, she remains mindful of whom she truly serves and is watchful and attentive to the things of God.

The eyes of which the psalmist speaks, remain on the Lord *'till he show us his mercy.'*⁴ In other words, biding our time, we have to both watch and wait. The eyes of a good and attentive servant do not simply look, they scan constantly, anticipating and expecting a signal or a sign. In serving someone we give them our time, and many hours every day are spent by people watching and waiting on others, be it in homes or hospitals, at stations or surgeries, or in shops and services. In her encounter with

the angel Gabriel, Mary is revealed to have been using her time wisely. Seeking to choose the path to God and to submit her will to his, Mary, *'so highly favoured,'*⁵ is already faithfully at work serving her Master, for as St Augustine expressed it, the blessed virgin *'conceived in her heart before her womb.'*⁶ The unhesitating and total self-giving of Mary, that will see her subordinate herself to the will of God, flows from a life and heart that is already watching and waiting in his service. Mary is the first disciple and the model of true discipleship.

The Annunciation is not just pivotal for Our Lady's life; it is central to all our lives and the whole of human history. Mary does not simply passively receive the gift of God's son. As the mother of Jesus she actively carries and gives birth to the Word made flesh, and uniquely shares thereby in the mediation of her son, the Christ, between God and humanity. Mary's *fiat*, her yes to God, was the decisive moment for the accomplishment of the divine plan of salvation. God was willing to employ the 'help' and Mary was willing to give it. Mary offers to *'Christians of all times a sublime model of service.'*⁷

In taking the unprecedented step of adding the heraldic charge 'M' to the escutcheon (shield) of his coat of arms, Pope St John Paul II signified at the beginning of his papacy his particular devotion to the Mother of God. As we end our novena dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows it is not inappropriate to conclude with some words from a man, who himself knew what it meant to pay the cost of discipleship with one's own body. *'If at the moment of the Annunciation, Mary does not yet know of the sacrifice which will mark Christ's mission, Simeon's prophecy will enable her to glimpse her Son's tragic destiny. The Virgin will be associated with him in intimate sharing. With her total obedience to God's will, Mary is ready to live all that divine love may plan for her life, even to the "sword" that will pierce her soul.'*⁸

*'Joyful Mother, full of gladness, in your arms your Lord was borne.
Mournful Mother, full of sadness, all your heart with pain was torn.
Glorious Mother, now rewarded with a crown at Jesus' hand,
age to age your name recorded shall be blest in every land.'*⁹

Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

23 June 2020

The picture is of *Annunciation*, Fra Angelico, 1395-1455, Museo del Prado, Madrid

1. *The angel Gabriel from heaven came*, verse 1, Basque carol, trans. S. Baring-Gould
2. *Psalm 122:2-3*
3. *The Complete Essays*, II:12, Michel de Montaigne, trans. M. A. Screech
4. *Psalm 122:3*
5. *Luke 1:28*
6. *Discourses*, 215, 4, St Augustine
7. *General Audience*, Pope St John Paul II, September 4, 1996
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Sing of Mary, pure and lowly*, verse 4, R. F. Palmer, 1891-1985