

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> March 2025 i.e. the Feast of the Annunciation.

Isaiah 7:10-14

Hebrews 10:4-10

Luke 1:26-38

In a few weeks we'll be keeping Holy Week, the annual memorial of the week when Jesus died. There's a story from that time where Jesus says of his disciples that "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." [Matthew 26:41] On that occasion Jesus had asked his friends to stay up late and pray with him; but they fall asleep. Something about the way that humans frustrate grace; it makes it difficult for us to do good things like staying up really late praying.

"The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." What precisely that means is open to interpretation. I like to think that Jesus is talking about the brokenness of the human soul. To be specific, he's talking about how, for most of us, there's a mismatch between what we know is good, and what we are willing to do – what we choose. In technical theological language that's a difference between the intellect and the will. Intellect is the word that theologians use for the part of the human soul that deals with memory and which discerns truth and goodness. The will, on the other hand, is the part of the soul that "moves towards" things, the faculty for desiring and choosing.

Someone asked me the other day if "intellect" in this sense means the same as intelligence. (I have really fun conversations with people, by the way.) The simple answer is no: people we call intelligent can be very good at deceiving themselves and others about the truth; sometimes that might be what we're paying them to use their intelligence for. When they don't realise that they're deceiving and being deceived, they have what theologians would call a "defect in the intellect". They're not stupid as such; but they have forgotten what truth and goodness looks like. Contrast that with the people who we call the "salt of the earth": people who may not be intelligent by the world's standards, but who intuitively know the difference between what is good and what is not.

Why am I talking about the soul? Why does it matter that human beings are baffled and divided even within themselves? In a nutshell, this technical stuff helps me frame the whole story of human need and human salvation. I don't go in for theologies that talk about a fall from primordial grace. [What I would call the classic Augustinian picture of the Problem of human sinfulness is one where we started off in a condition of perfect union with each other and God, but a couple of people made a couple of bad choices; and here we are millennia later with wars and cancer and all that. I don't think that's plausible in the light of what we now know about human origins.] But I will go in for

some version or other of the idea of Original Sin. I take Original Sin to mean that true freedom for human beings is always an aspiration: none of us is able to make free choices in the world as it is, because there are things within us and outside of us which will always get in the way. True freedom is the ability always to know and always to choose what is good. And I'm conscious that in saying that I'm contradicting almost everything our culture tells us about freedom – but that's another sermon.

For human beings the greatest good of all is union: union with God, union with each other. But for human beings to be united with others, we first need to be united in ourselves. We cannot love anyone wholeheartedly until we have a whole heart. And so it follows that what human beings need – what our salvation looks like – is the restoration, or the creation, of human souls: minds that know what is good; and hearts that desire the good.

The event that we are celebrating today is, on one level, something perfectly ordinary. A young woman is presented with a choice; and she chooses the best thing. It's not just the best thing for her; it is the best thing for literally everyone. Everyone who has ever been born; everyone who ever will be born. Mary discerned that what she was being offered was the goal of our human desiring: Immanuel, God-with-us. Mary chose that good for us. What could be more normal? – dare I say it – what could be more natural than someone choosing something so good? And yet we know that human beings are so good at choosing the bad things; we are so bad at knowing whether the bad things are even bad.

So I will say that what we celebrate on this Feast is as central a part of the story of our human healing and restoration as anything that happens further down the line. We needed Mary to say yes: yes to the Good, God-with-us.

Here I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

And so she makes it possible for us to say yes too. So it is right that all generations should call her blessed.

