

# The Art of Christmas

1



Angels



Luke 1.5–20

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John... He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

An Angel  
Announces  
the Birth of  
John the  
Baptist to  
Zechariah

Domenico  
Ghirlandaio

Around the time of the birth of Jesus, the angels are very busy on God's business, which is one of the things that signals to us that the child is no ordinary human being: angels do not run errands for human beings, which makes the interaction of Gabriel with first Zechariah and then Mary so very interesting. Gabriel comes to tell Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth are to be parents to John the Baptist, the 'forerunner', whose ministry will announce the coming of the Saviour; and then Gabriel comes to tell Mary that she is to be the mother of Jesus Christ.

Psalm 8 is a hymn to the sovereignty of God. When the Psalmist sees God's power in creation, it puts human power in perspective: human beings wield delegated power, and only out of the generosity of God. 'You have made them a little lower than the angels', says the psalmist. Zechariah seems to have forgotten the proper hierarchy between angels and humans. Ghirlandaio shows him at the altar in the Temple, a person of some significance. Around him are groups of well-dressed, gossiping men, some of them apparently watching Zechariah, some of them less concerned. It is not clear what they see of the interaction between Zechariah and the angel, but if the angel is visible to them, they seem largely suspicious rather than excited. Some women peep through the doorway, but this is a place for important men, and the angel is clearly a stranger, almost vulnerable, stepping out with its bare feet and uncovered head.





Although Luke says that Zechariah was terrified, he still has the presence of mind to ask the angel for a sign. Gabriel has come to tell Zechariah that, old as he and his wife Elizabeth are, their prayers are to be answered; they are to have a son, whose birth will be a celebration to many more than themselves. Frostily, Gabriel puts Zechariah in his place: 'Do you know who I am?', he asks, in effect, silencing Zechariah, literally as well as metaphorically.

Luke 1.26–38 | In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

## Annunciation

Sandro Botticelli

Gabriel's approach to Mary is completely different. Ghirlandaio shows the dialogue between Zechariah and Gabriel in a formal, busy setting, whereas in Botticelli's painting, Mary and Gabriel are alone. Gabriel rebukes Zechariah, but kneels to Mary. The mother of the Lord is not lower than the angels, in Gabriel's eyes.

Mary's face and her body language bring out the conflict of her emotions. She is afraid, welcoming, retreating, advancing, concerned, puzzled. Gently, the angel kneels, not encroaching into her space, staying behind the bold white line on the floor. His wings look strong, muscled, and the air around him seems to have bent with the speed and power of his arrival; but he holds himself with careful restraint, gazing up at the face of the young woman, determined not to frighten her. Only the hands, angelic and human, begin to reach towards each other. Mary is half-turned away, and yet also attentive; her hand is partly fending the angel off and partly welcoming; her face is a study in irresolution, responsive yet unsure. The pattern on the floor is almost like a ladder, leading to the world outside the window. The conversation going on here is momentous: if Mary says no, what becomes of creation, waiting so eagerly for its salvation?

Zechariah and Elizabeth have longed for a child to bless their years of marriage; everyone will rejoice with them at this unexpected miracle. Mary's position is far harder: she is not yet married and there is every possibility that her fiancé will not accept her once her pregnancy is discovered. The interaction with the angel suggests that there is a real opportunity for Mary to





refuse but that it is only 'real' in an abstract way. Gabriel tells Mary that she has 'found favour with God'. God already knows Mary well and understands her character, her courage, her love of God. God is not asking Mary to do something that goes against the grain of her nature. Even though when she says yes, she does not understand the full extent of what is to come, she does know that she is to be caught up in the revolutionary work of God, to bring down the powerful, to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry and to show mercy: this is her song, the Magnificat (Luke 1.46–55). Mary longs for a better world; she trusts that what God is asking of her is what she most desires. God really does know Mary very well.