

Dear Parishioners,

Some years ago, in the middle of Summer, I was out walking on the moors above White Coppice near Chorley. It was a hot, balmy day. The sky had been completely clear. But without warning it grew ominously dark and the atmosphere oppressively close. A storm broke. There was electricity in the air above. It dawned on me that the top of my head was the highest point around, that it was bald, and wet! A perfect lightning conductor. I've never moved so fast...

The way we picture scenes from scripture has been greatly influenced by Christian art. I've only to say: 'The Annunciation' and you're probably seeing in your mind's eye the famous painting by Fra Angelico. Our Lady is kneeling in humble prayer and the angel Gabriel approaches reverently. He looks as though he is about to kneel. It is a serene image.

But the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that 'the Lord's ministers are flames of fire' (Heb 1:8). Angels, especially Archangels are awesome beings. It's not too fanciful to imagine the air in that little house at Nazareth crackling with power. No wonder the Archangel has to say: 'Do not be afraid.'

He has come to make the greatest request that human ears have ever heard: 'Will you allow the Son of God to enter the world... to put on flesh... in your womb?' And instead of running away, as I did that day on the moors, this young girl raises her hand to the power above her and says: 'Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to Thy word.' She offers herself to be the lightning conductor by which the power of God can enter the world. At that moment Christ is here. Heaven is on earth. Not only Nazareth but the world has been changed for ever.

It's very significant that when your parents or godparents brought you for Baptism the priest handed them fire. A flaming candle. We might say that you too were given to God as a child to be a conductor, a channel for the fire of God's power and love to come into the world.

All that of course happened many years ago for most of us and we had no choice about it. But every time we pray, every time we come to Mass, we renew the offering our parents made. We raise our hand, like our Lady, and we say: 'Let God's Grace come to me, to change me and then to change the world.'

Pope Benedict used a startling image in his Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007). He said that the miracle of Transubstantiation which takes place in the Mass is a kind of 'nuclear fission' which sets off a chain reaction. The bread and wine are transformed. Those who receive them are transformed. And, through them, all things are transformed.

Should we come to Mass in fear and trembling then? Certainly we should be reverent. We are on holy ground. Christ is drawing near. But we're in our Father's house. And our Heavenly Mother is here too. She reassures us and gently leads us forward, as we bow our heads before the majesty of God and say: 'Behold, the servant of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to Thy Word.'

God bless you,
Father O'Shea