

**Sermon Preached at Nambucca Heads Anglican
Advent Sunday 2022**

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*The Cestello Annunciation, Sandro Botticelli, 1489.
Le Gallerie Degli Uffizi. Public Domain.*

Today I offer for our reflection Botticelli's painting of the Annunciation: Mary being visited by the Angel Gabriel.

I'm sure that the visit of an angel is always a surprise. By the looks of him, this particular angel seems to have arrived with speed and power, yet respectfully kneels, lowering himself before Mary.

Mary is conflicted. Maybe not as surprised as we might have imagined, yet her body language signals a conflict of emotions: she is, all at once, welcoming, retreating, advancing, concerned, puzzled.

Half turned away, yet also attentive.
Pulling back, yet leaning towards.
Partly fending off the angel, yet partly welcoming
Responsive, yet unsure.

I offer this image for our reflection this Advent not just because Mary and her angelic encounters are part of our Advent journey, but because in many ways it echoes our emotions in this Advent season.

On the Sundays of Advent we hear God's message of hope, peace, joy and love; yet we know the reality of our world – of the struggle with the pandemic, war, racism, climate

change, intolerance and more – we give so much of our attention to these realities that surround us.

While Advent points us to the Kingdom, reality reminds us that we live between the now and the not yet. God is bringing something about – but it hasn't fully come So like Mary in the Boticelli painting, we are a conflict of emotions:

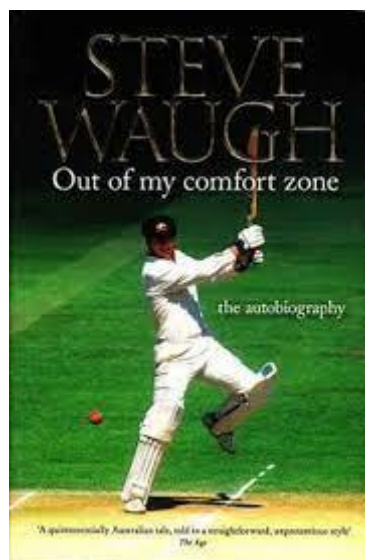
At Advent, we are welcoming, retreating, advancing, concerned, puzzled – all at the same time. In response to the message of Advent in the readings and prayers, we are half turned away, yet also attentive; Pulling back, yet leaning towards; Responsive, yet unsure.

Research shows that humans fear many things. Apart from phobias and those kinds of fears, the top things people fear include loss of a loved one (children's worst fears inc losing their parents); fear of making the wrong choice (such as choosing the wrong partner, or some other significant decision); fear of our own death; fear of change, loneliness, rejection, uncertainty, being judged, inadequacy, loss of freedom.

I wonder, what do you fear?

Do they include any of these fears? If so, which ones?

One of my sporting heroes is Steve Waugh: long since retired but one of the greatest cricketers of his day – he wrote that whenever he didn't play well he thought of himself as a failure, not just a failure as a player, but as a person.



He said that he judged his own worth as a person by his on-field performance.

Fear plays around with our heads in that kind of way.

Self-doubt and fear can lead us to draw back and deny God's creative offer within us.

And yet Mary was also leaning towards God's creative offer, she was wanting to embrace the possibility of which the angel spoke.

I recently attended the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops in the United Kingdom. There were many insights and learnings for me. One was that English speaking, "Anglos" like me are now very much in the minority: 650 bishops from 165 countries, who spoke 1500 languages.

This is reflective of the wider Anglican Communion of course. On his recent visit to Ballina, the Archbishop of Canterbury pointed out that the average Anglican is a woman in her 30s living in central Africa, most likely living in a situation of conflict or war, possibly living in a refugee camp somewhere.

For people living in these conditions (ie a significant proportion of Anglicans who are today celebrating Advent Sunday just like we are) what does this Advent message of hope, peace, joy and love really mean? Their day to day reality is probably not very hopeful or peaceful: like Botticelli's Mary, they'd have good reason to draw back!

One of the things that had the biggest impact on me was to hear stories of Christians from contexts like these.

The World President of the MU, a lady from the West Indies: told of a powerful story from Formosa in Argentina, where there was a lot of violence and crime being committed by gangs of local youths.

Politicians, community leaders and the police had tried to turn things around but were unsuccessful.

One day a large group of angry mothers were seen approaching the local police station.

With the prospect of being confronted by a large group of angry mothers – quite formidable – they went into red alert/lockdown.

The women wanted something done. Many were Anglican women, members of the MU - they wanted change – they wanted God's Kingdom values of peace and reconciliation to be real in their communities.

They worked together with the police, the youth and others to address the problem of youth violence and crime.

We heard how the MU is making a real difference in other communities as well.

The women sought to make God's Kingdom values of peace and justice a reality in their community. They weren't waiting for someone else to do it, but embracing the possibility of change and responding to God's call in their situation.

Like Mary, I'm sure they had mixed emotions and it probably took them some time to gather themselves – to ponder the challenges and what God was calling them to – but then they responded with faith and courage.

Today's reading from Isaiah (2:1-5) is a beautiful vision of God's gracious invitation to come to him.

Both the Epistle reading (Romans 13:9-14) and today's Gospel (Matthew 24: 36-44) suggest that there is an urgent need to respond now – an urgent Advent appeal of you like, for the night is far gone and the day is near.

I quoted Steve Waugh before – his autobiography is entitled *Out of My Comfort Zone*. The angel's visit drew Mary out of her comfort zone. As we know, she responded fully with a "yes" to God's call in her life.

Can you think of an instance recently when God might have been trying to awaken you to his presence – to his "Comings"?

Looking at Botticelli's Annunciation again, I wonder where you are, I wonder where I am, in terms of drawing back, retreating, or welcoming and embracing God's invitation?

We too are called out of a comfort zone defined by our self-doubts and fears to cooperate with God and embrace his call to us.

Let us pray that we may hear ever more profoundly your call in our lives:

Almighty God, as we rejoice in your Son's first coming, so we await with eager expectation the fulfillment of his promise that he will come among us again. Strengthen us in our faith, that we may know his presence with us in our daily lives, and fashion our souls to be places where his coming righteousness will be at home, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Prayer from *The Canterbury book of New Parish Prayers*. Max Kramer.