

Who knows who Alan Dedicoat is? You would be forgiven if you couldn't pick him out in a line-up but I suspect you would know his voice. He is the BBC announcer coined "the Voice of the Balls" by Terry Wogan. His job is to make announcements and link programs together and was for a time the voice who told us which lottery balls were successful each week. Today, as we hear the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is to be the mother of God incarnate I have in my mind "the Voice of the Balls" bringing this rather terrifying, but exciting, news with his inflexions, excitement, and enthusiasm.

We have all grown used to announcements – they are all around us: from loudspeakers in the supermarkets and at train stations, to government directives on the tele we are bombarded with news and information – often unexpected and unwanted – sometimes bringing good news but more often than not bringing bad news. There is the potential for information overload. As I wonder round Sainsbury's each week I find myself joining-in with the Covid announcements having heard them so often! On Thursday, when the government announced that we were going into Tier 3 restrictions you could almost hear the collective sigh of the public thinking 'that was inevitable' followed by questions over how would this work and will it make a difference. As is always the case the announcement is just a means of bearing news. What we do with that news is the fundamental point.

Take the latest Covid announcement about going into Tier 3 as an example: you can either listen to it, and act within the permitted restrictions in the hope that the virus might be contained, or you can dismiss it thinking you know better and act, illegally, in ways that contravene the restrictions. You can accept or you can deny. Two choices.

In our Gospel today, Mary also was faced with some choices. Firstly, she had to decide whether this angel, this messenger, was really speaking on behalf of God with a message especially for her. Was he real? Was this a dream? A nightmare? A rather poor practical joke? Mary had to choose. And then, she had to decide whether she wanted to accept the content of this message – was she prepared to be the mother of God incarnate and all that that would entail? Could she possibly do what the angel said? She needed convincing. She asked questions and the angel gave her a sign telling her that her relative Elizabeth (who was considered old and barren) was heavy with child – a sign that God can do the impossible! And after weighing all this in her mind Mary agreed to the angel's news and became the Theotokos – the God bearer.

The temptation in today's sermon is simply to remind us all to be imitators of Mary in subjecting ourselves to the will of God. Of course that message is still true but it tends to only focus on the positive aspects of doing so. It focuses on the good news that Mary said "yes" to God, and that God has a purpose and calling for each of us. This can make us feel special. But it tends to ignore the pain and sacrifice Mary's "yes" to angel heralded. Who can forget that there she was at the foot of the cross watching her innocent son being executed? Who can forget that her fiancée wanted to leave her when he found out about her remarkable pregnancy? The pains and sacrifices of Mary are real. And they are real for us too. Most likely we will not be asked to be God's parent's on earth; nor will we have to watch our children being executed; we will not be asked to tell our spouses or partners that we are pregnant and that God is the father either. But there will be, and always are, sacrifices and pains to be borne alongside the joys of hearing the call God makes on our lives and responding to that call.

Today, just 5 days out from Christmas, we rightly rejoice in Mary's acceptance to be the mother of God incarnate and her role in bringing about the salvation of the world. She was unique and we give thanks for her fortitude and forbearance in obeying her calling. But we must never lose sight of who brought about this wondrous birth which we'll celebrate on Friday. This all came about through God's activity – his plan, his message, his messenger, his Son. The temptation on discerning God's call is to believe it's all down to you and that you are the one with whom nothing is impossible. But alas that just isn't true. May our prayer today be "Help me to recognise the messenger and to understand the message."