

The Annunciation Icons and Wrought Iron Screen for St Michaels and All Angels, Bedford Park, Chiswick.

The Annunciation Icons

The two icons that you see to the left and the right of the altar depict the Annunciation. The Archangel Gabriel and the Mother of God are engaged in a conversation, which eventually leads to the Virgin's acceptance of Gabriel's promise: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born of you will be called holy, the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

This was the fulfilment of the prophecy to Isaiah given seven centuries earlier: "Behold, I give you a sign: A Virgin shall conceive a child, and his name shall be Emmanuel, which means God with us." The Holy Spirit came upon her to conceive in her womb Jesus, who is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity made man.

The icons stand either side of the altar to show that this historical Annunciation happens also in our daily lives and in the Holy Liturgy. We are involved in this conversation between Mary and the angel. They speak across real liturgical space. God is asking us if He can conceive Christ in our own hearts and lives. And at every Holy Communion service at the epiclesis we beseech the Father "to send down the Holy Spirit upon us and upon these Thy gifts" to make them the Body and blood of Christ.

What else do we see in these icons? What makes holy icons special is not just the holy themes that they depict but how they depict these themes. Icons show the world seen with the eye of the heart and not just the eyes of the body. They show the world transfigured, show the world burning with divine grace without being consumed. They reveal the purpose of God behind events. Their abstraction makes them more realistic than naturalistic paintings because they reveal spiritual as well as material truths, invisible as well as visible realities.

The icon of the Archangel Gabriel

Perhaps the first things we notice about these icons are their altered proportions and their relative flatness. The word icon is Greek for image, and the flatness of holy icons exists to lead us through themselves to the persons they depict. This flatness is a sort of deliberate imperfection that says: "When you look at me you are looking at the person I depict". Icons are a door between heaven and earth.

In these icons the figures are slightly elongated, to give them a sense of majesty and heightened spirituality. The iconographer, Aidan Hart, drew these proportions and other details from early English Romanesque iconography, in particular the Bury St Edmunds Bible, an illuminated manuscript created around 1130 AD. Although we might associate icons purely with Eastern Orthodox Christianity, they are in fact also an early western tradition.

The ceramic tiles beneath the feet of Gabriel and the Mother of God echo the tiles on the altar floor before you, encouraging us to realise that an annunciation is happening now, in this building.

Behind the tiles we see greenery and flowers. These suggest that the path to paradise has begun to open. In the Orthodox Church's hymns for the Annunciation, Mary is contrasted with Eve. Eve was quick to believe the promises of the serpent - the fallen angel Lucifer - and thereby expelled herself from Paradise. Mary, by contrast, questions and tests the angel until she is sure that this is a divine visitation and not a delusion or devilish seduction. She then believes his words, and the ensuing incarnation thereby opens the way to Paradise.

The sceptre-like staff that Gabriel holds represents both the power and God-given authority of angels and also the traveller's staff: "In the ninth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin" (Luke 1:26, 27). He wears the sandals of a traveller (angel means messenger), while Mary wears the red footwear of a queen in her palace. The great archangel is an envoy of the King of heaven sent to the Queen of heaven. His left wing sweeps upwards to indicate his swift and obedient descent from God to earth, while the tassels of his head band flap to symbolise his quick response to God's bidding.

The archangel is striding forward to show that God has taken the initiative in the Incarnation, not man. Mary by contrast is standing still, the discerning, wise and pure recipient of God's promise. Gabriel's right hand is raised in a gesture of blessing.

The gold background is not really a background, but represents God, "in whom we live and move and have our being" to quote St Paul (Acts 17:28). Gold is also found on Gabriel and Mary's garments to show that the whole creation, including inanimate matter, can be transfigured by this same divine light, this uncreated grace as some theologians call God's presence. Above all, Gabriel and Mary have a gold halo, to represent that God wills to dwell within us, to deify us and make us god-like through loving relationship with Him.

The Icon of the Mother of God

Mary holds a skein of scarlet thread in her left hand, while the spool falls from her right in surprise at the divine visitation. This thread is depicted in Annunciation images from the fifth century onwards. By an early tradition found in the apocryphal *Protevangelion* of James dating to around 145 AD, the lot fell to the young Mary to spin the true purple and scarlet thread to make into the veil of the new temple, the veil that hangs between the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place. This veil is a reference both to the flesh (human nature) and the royal dignity (divine nature) of Christ.

Behind the Virgin we this scarlet veil parted, to symbolise that through Christ's death and resurrection "we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)..." (Hebrews 10:19,20).

The building behind Mary is a temple. She herself has become the temple of God, for God the Word has come to dwell in her and take upon Himself her, and thereby our, human nature. We notice that the roof is based on the church of St Michael's and All Angels where you now stand. She and all the angels and saints are present with us here in Christ.

Behind Mary is a throne, for she herself has become the throne of God. As the halo suggests, God dwells in her and radiates from her through the Holy Spirit. She stands upon a jewelled podium, for though a simple maiden on earth she is also the Queen of Heaven, the Mother of the King of kings.

She wears both an earth red and an azurite blue garment. The red represents her natural humanity, while the heavenly blue represents the divinity of Christ which she has accepted through God's grace. We are humans by nature who are called to become gods by grace, while Christ is divine by nature and has become human out of His love for us.

The Virgin's right hand is raised both in discerning questioning of Gabriel's words, and ultimately, in her acceptance of them: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). She looks away from the angel to indicate her deep contemplation of the angel's words, "Greetings, favoured one. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." Luke goes on to say that Mary "was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:28,29).

But Mary is also looking out at us, as though to ask, "Do you too wish to have Christ born in you?" While the Announcing is a real historical and unique event, its fulfilment is found in each person becoming themselves a Christ bearer, a Christophoros.

The letters written at the top of the icon are the first and last letters of the Greek words, Μητηρ του Θεου (*Mētēr tou Theou*), meaning the Mother of God. A very important Church council called the Council of Ephesus decreed in 431 AD that Mary is "God bearer" (*Theotokos* in the original Greek) because her son Jesus is both God and man: one Divine Person with two natures, divine and human. The fulfilment of this incarnation was pithily described by St Athanasius the Great 1700 years ago: "God was made man that we might be made God"¹. This teaching of theosis was also confirmed by Lancelot Andrewes, the great Anglican bishop, scholar, and general editor of the King James Bible, who wrote "He clothed with our flesh, and we invested with His Spirit."²

How the icons were made

¹ St. Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, 54.

² Lancelot Andrewes, *Ninety-Six Sermons*, ed. J H Parker, (Oxford, 1843), p. 109.

The two icons were painted by Aidan Hart, the panels made by Dylan Hartley, and the gilding executed by Imogen Maxfield. The panels are made of tulip wood (American poplar), with oak braces dovetailed into the back to prevent warping but allow movement in the panel. The surface was then covered with rabbit skin glue, followed by linen cloth, then up to fifteen layers of gesso made from chalk powder and the glue. This was sanded smooth with nine grades of sandpaper. A further six layers of a red clay mixed with the rabbit skin glue called bole were then applied to the areas to be gilded. This again was sanded smooth. Water and alcohol was then puddled onto the bole an area at a time, then 23 1/2 carat gold leaf laid down. Once the laying was completed, the gold was polished using an agate stone. The paints are the traditional egg tempera, made of egg yolk mixed with natural pigments. The blue is from the semi-precious stone azurite, and the other colours are from earths, such as terre verte and yellow and red ochre.

The Iron Screen

This screen has been hand forged by master blacksmith Frazer Picot of Shropshire. No arc welding has been used, all joins being made using the traditional 'fire welding' process. The two pieces of metal to be joined are heated to a critical temperature and then beaten together, a process that requires much skill to do well.

Although its purpose is largely decorative and to divert the eye from the wooden organ pipes, the screen's design is also symbolic. The four vertical columns on the edges and either side of the icon represent the four rivers of paradise. Atop the screen the swirling design is the tree of life surmounted by the cross. What for Christ was the cross of death became for man the tree of life, the fruit of which is the Holy Spirit who makes all believers gods by grace.