

# KINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH ONLINE NOTICE BOARD – 56

*Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, 'Hail, you are highly favoured, the Lord is with you: blessed are you among women.'* (Luke 1.26-28)

**G**abriel's greeting has no equal and no parallel in the whole range of Scripture. As the calling he brought to Mary was unique and without equal, so too was his greeting.

The significance and weight of his greeting is emphasised by Mary's response: *she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.* (verse 29) Gabriel's words perplexed and disturbed Mary. Mary's reaction reflected the profound nature of Gabriel's greeting, it also helps us to understand his words. We need help, because these few words confirm something not easily grasped. So just what was it he said and what does it mean?

*'Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!*

There are three sections in this short, profound greeting:

1. a salutation or greeting: *Hail*
2. a description of Mary's character and privilege: *highly favoured one*
3. an explanation for her privilege: *the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women*

Mary was shocked; she was puzzled by what Gabriel said to her. This is full of meaning: Mary it seems wasn't perplexed by his appearance but his *words*. What he said was astounding, his words were completely unexpected; to Mary they were altogether surprising. It would be understandable if Mary's reaction of surprise had been prompted by the promise Gabriel was later to give Mary, that she would be Mother of the Son of the Highest. But that came later. What astounded Mary is what the archangel said, not about the child to be born or about the miraculous nature of his birth, but about *her!*

Gabriel used a single word to describe to Mary her character as God viewed her. It is this word, and all it means, that astonished Mary – and continues to astonish us! The word Gabriel used described Mary as a person *who has been, and who will continue to be, fully graced*. That is the meaning of this single word. Gabriel speaks in words given by God, and speaks as the messenger 'sent from God'. He says that in the past God had worked in Mary's life, that he continues to do so now, and that he will continue to do so in the future. And this is what lies behind his description of Mary as one who is *fully graced*. Gabriel says that God was *with her*, and throughout her

life the Holy Spirit had been preparing Mary to be the vessel suitable to be the mother of the Lord. And now, at this moment when Gabriel stands before her, when ‘the time had fully come’ (Galatians 4.4) Mary is *fully graced*. These words of the Archangel Gabriel’s greeting to Mary may be translated as *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women*.<sup>1</sup> In this fullness of grace Mary conceived the Son of God and became the greatest single human influence in the earthly life of Jesus.

One more thing should be said as we reflect on Mary’s response to Gabriel’s words, pondering on her astonishment and perplexity. It is that Mary’s fullness of grace did not prevent her from being perplexed and astonished. The grace she received was not a cold, remote, unhuman perfection. Holy and pure she was, Mary nonetheless knew what it is to be overwhelmed and astonished by what God says and what he does. She knew the frailty of human life. She knew the human vulnerability and weakness that equip a person to be sympathetic and approachable; the human weakness and defencelessness that mean we are overwhelmed in the presence of God – and in the presence of evil.

Have we ever thought of the meaning of the mystery of the Annunciation? When the time had come when God had resolved to realise his incarnation before our eyes, He had first of all to raise up in the world a virtue capable of drawing Him as far as ourselves. He needed a mother who would engender Him in the human sphere. What did He do? He created the Virgin Mary, that is to say He called forth on earth a purity so great that, within this transparency, He would concentrate Himself to the point of appearing a little child.

(Teilhard de Chardin)

No wonder Mary was astonished at his words!

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<sup>1</sup> This reflects the translation in the *Authorised Version*, other more modern translations omit some of these words.