

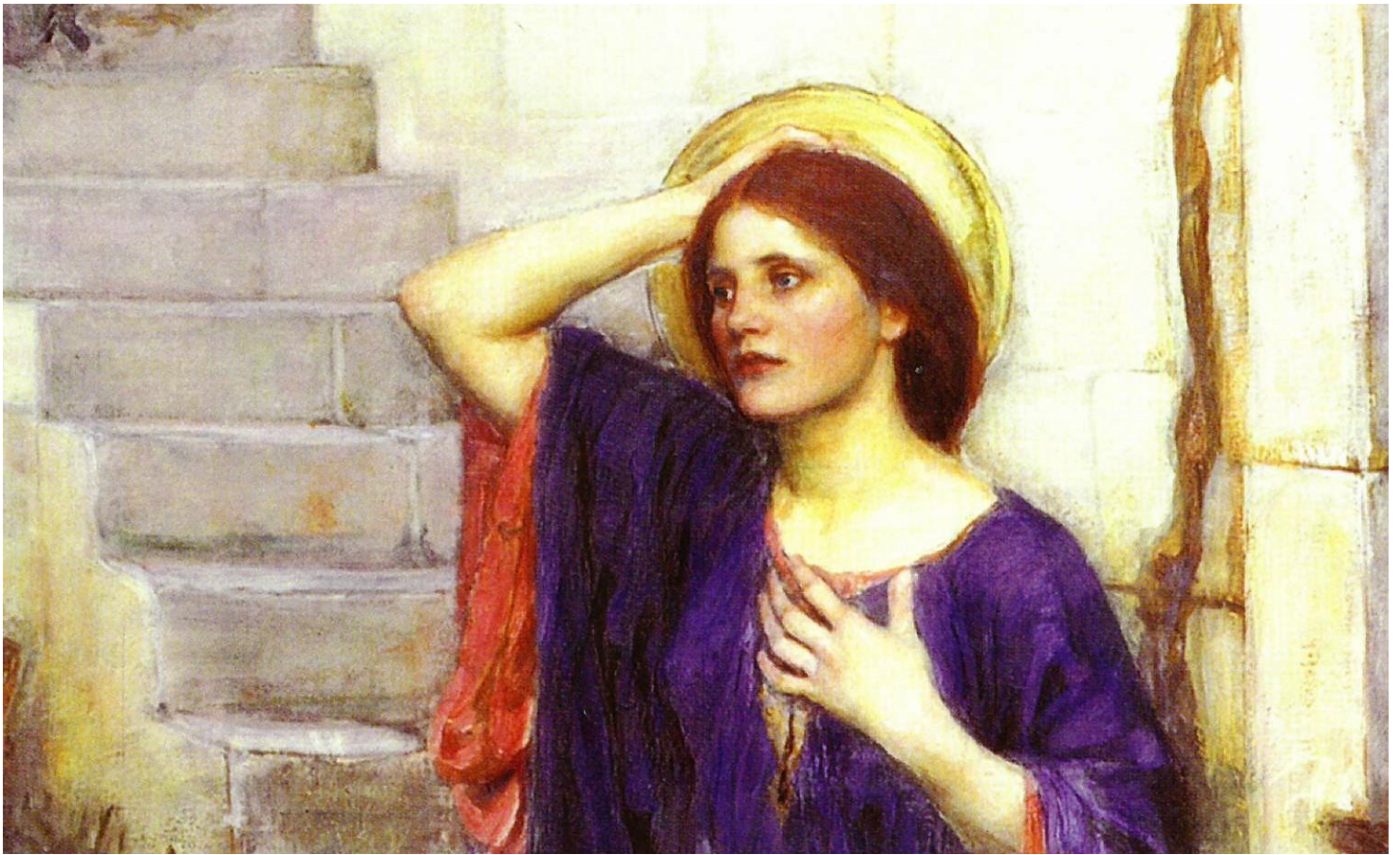
*Mary knew of the promised Messiah: she had not expected to be his mother! Fr Denis McBride C.Ss.R. tells us that, filled with the promise, she looked forward in hope – even if it was sometimes complicated and painful.*

How do you walk on an unmapped road, in the fog, with confidence? There are no antique maps, previously charted, to guide you on the way. There are no people to consult who have experienced the challenge you are now facing, no experts to guide you with their shared wisdom. No one has walked this road before you. Nobody. You have no idea where the road will end, what you will confront on the way; you can only imagine how you will manage. You might wonder: did you say yes too quickly, agree too readily to take this unforeseen road? Should you have asked more questions? Should you have insisted on more guidance? Do you look behind as you notice that what was once familiar territory is now rapidly disappearing in the fog? Will there be a way back to the uncomplicated life you left behind you? And the question that hovers over everything for Mary: not what will this child turn out to be, but how will she and Joseph manage his upbringing? How do you mother the Son of God?

Sometimes the only way we can learn is by doing, setting out, leaving the cautious voices behind us even though we might still be afraid of our own inexperience and inadequacy. There is no rehearsal we know only live performance. We must trust that voice within, the voice that we have discovered is truly ours, and head out to welcome the unforeseen. And we might know that we are not wholly alone in this new adventure.

At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke celebrates that something radically new is going to happen: because of God's initiative and a young girl's "Yes" to the unforeseen, the presence of God is going to become vulnerable in human flesh. In the ancient days it was the Ark of the Covenant that marked the presence of God; the nearness of God was symbolised by the empty space between the cherubim on the Ark. Emptiness. Now, Luke says, something new is going to happen. The presence of God is going to take human shape in the womb of Mary. Mary of Nazareth is the tabernacle of God.

Mary, like all mothers, gives over her body and mind and soul so that new life may be born. She does that so that a life larger than hers may take its own place in the world. All mothers must wait for the



gradual process that is happening within them; they must learn to let go of the child within them. They must not only nurture the presence of the child within them; they must nurture the leaving of the child. The act of childbirth is the painful act of letting go, so that the life within can take its own separate place in the world. Mary's vocation is not only to hold Jesus within her but also to let him go, let him become the person he must become.

Mary assists the struggle of God to be one like us. There is something dangerously new about Mary. She is the woman at the centre of the Christian story, essential to this new beginning. It is a woman, not a man, who brings God's real presence into the world. Through her the presence of the *Christos Kyrios* will be known and celebrated.

And yet Mary's "Yes" in her annunciation was, by definition, a yes to the unseen and the unimaginable. When she declared her fiat she could not have known everything that her yes entailed, any more than anyone who stands at the altar and solemnly promises "*Till death us do part*" knows what the unseen journey of marriage will involve. Promises are made in the fog.

The words we say, certainly at the time of saying, are important as we aim ourselves into an unknown future. "*Words are for those with promises to keep*". Sometimes the words we use are much bigger than our capacity to deliver; at other times we manage to struggle into fidelity and en flesh the promises we made.

We celebrate Mary, not only as a maker of promises but also as a keeper of promises. She fosters this child within her and then shares him with a waiting world. This child is her own, but not entirely her own: he is given, as Simeon prophesied, as a light to enlighten all peoples. That is why we celebrate Mary as a model for all Christians. As Christians we are challenged to carry Christ, not in wombs, but in hearts and minds, into the dark places of the world, carry him to those who are broken and hurt and wounded, those who are dying to hear good news. While we celebrate Mary as the unique *theotokos*, we are pledged to be God-bearers ourselves and share the Christ within us as liberating Gospel.