

Homily: Sunday 20th December.

4th Sunday of Advent 2020.

Readings (Year B): 1st; 2 Samuel 7:1-5. 8-12.14.16; Psalm; 88.
2nd; Romans 16:25-27; Gospel; Luke 1:26-38

It is now 9 months since the first lockdown, and we were in the midst of Lent, following the CaFE course “Let it be done unto me according to your word: How Mary helps us to be filled with God,” and that was helping us in the lead up to the declaration and re-dedication of England as Mary’s Dowry. What a time it has been, and continues to be ever since.

The gospel passage today must be one of the most familiar to us, as it occurs on so many of the feasts of our Lady throughout the year, and is one of the major scenes in all nativity plays. It begins with the extravagant love of God who freely chose Mary to be mother of his beloved Son. God’s choice of Mary made her ‘full of grace’. Grace is God’s gift, Mary was full of it. There is no point in asking what Mary did to deserve that; she didn’t do anything to deserve it, because it was sheer gift. Nobody deserves gifts: nobody is entitled to favours. Gifts and favours reflect the generosity of the giver.

The gospel does not begin with what Mary does: it begins with what God does through Mary. God’s choice of Mary is the result of God’s freedom to choose Mary from among all women. When God chooses Mary, his choice makes her worthy, as his love has made her full of grace. The translation ‘highly favoured’ some scholars think is a weak translation of a very strong Greek word, which is used in the Bible only for this encounter.

The French has ‘*comblee de grace*’ *filled with grace*, which seems to do justice to it. She is full of grace because what she is asked to do is, in St John Henry Newman’s words, ‘bear a higher gift than grace should flesh and blood refine, God’s presence, and his very self, and essence, all divine.’ To be the mother of his only son, Jesus.

Mary's initial response is a questioning. Rightly so, as we do. We have many questions, and the situation today makes us question much, which is as it should. Mary wondered what was going on, we wonder today what is going on. Trust in so much of what is going on in life is being shaken.

Our 1st reading is about trust. Not so much about our trust in God, but God's trust in us. God gently puts David in his place. It is God who is the source of all blessings, and will do the building. For David it won't be a house in the physical sense but rather a dynasty. David's heirs will inherit his throne, which are part of the angel's story to Mary.

The gospel is also a story of trust: God entrusts himself to his own creation: he takes our human flesh, through Mary. Mary's life will be disturbed, but so in a sense will God's. God makes himself vulnerable in his Son, taking the risk of trusting one of his creatures. The salvation of the world depends upon it.

After the angel answers her, Mary trusts. We all know her answer.

The Office of Readings for 20 December is from St Bernard of Clairvaux who says "The whole world awaits Mary's reply. The price of our salvation is offered to you. We shall be set free at once if you consent. Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family in their exile from Paradise begs this of you. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed salvation for all the children of Adam, the whole of your race. Answer quickly. Reply in haste. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God.

Mary does, "I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me."

Mary, our mother, help us to follow your way in responding to God's word.