

Today we celebrate an act which has relevance and importance for all times, for all creation, for all possible worlds and especially for all mankind. A simple, devout Hebrew girl says 'yes' to God through his messenger, an archangel, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word". A contract between the divine and the human, between God and man, is signed and a young woman is chosen to be the executor of that contract on behalf of all mankind. According to the terms of that contract God divests or empties himself of his equality with his Father to enter this world through the womb of a special woman who has never known a man, which is the best that this world can offer to God according to the hymn at the Feast of the Nativity of Christ.

What hardship this 'fiat' or 'let it be so' will bring this young virgin, now known as the Mother of God or the One who gave birth to God! Brought out of the Temple to marry a much older man; to take on an existing family; to be forced to undertake a major journey as she is about to give birth in order to obey the dictates of the ruler of a powerful military force which is occupying her country and much of the known world; to be unable to find anywhere to give birth except with animals in a cave; to try to comprehend the confusion which she experiences as the humble and lowly and the rich and knowledgeable from a foreign land with their exotic gifts visit her family; and then to become a refugee or exile in a foreign country far away, in order to save the life of her son; to be the indirect cause of the bloody massacre of countless innocent young boys; and finally to stand in humiliation at the foot of a cross witnessing the execution of her son as a common criminal. Well did the aged Simeon say to her when Jesus was brought to the Temple according to the Jewish Law, "And a sword shall pierce your own heart also." This is depicted on the icon in front of me.

This courageous act of saying 'yes' to God reminds me of the prophet Isaiah's account of his meeting with God and his calling in the vision of chapter 6 of his prophecies which we read on Thursday in the second week of Great Lent. Isaiah has a vision and the glory of God is revealed to him in words which are sung by the choir in the middle of the consecration prayer before communion: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." The realisation of his own weakness and sinfulness overwhelms him but an angel brings a burning coal from the altar and by touching his lips it removes his sins. And then comes a loud voice with an invitation "Whom shall I send? Who will go for me to this people?" Isaiah boldly replies, "Here I am, send me." Like the Mother of God, the prophet of his own volition offers to go on God's mission to his people and the task is not pleasant as Israel will not listen to him and will be punished with exile in a foreign land. It is not surprising that the prophecies of Isaiah are prescribed for our weekday reading in Lent to remind us of how we too have betrayed God and drifted away from Him. Like the response of Mary, we see a tremendous act of service willingly undertaken by the prophet, a desire to serve God which comes from deep within. A hymn to the prophet Isaiah is sung very appropriately at the ordination of a priest and at the marriage service reminding those involved of the hard path which lies ahead, namely of green martyrdom and suffering. Burden bearing applies to both conditions and priests have a special relationship with the Mother of God no less than do many others.

In connection with the work of service or diakonia to which we are all called as members of the Church I should like to share with you three sayings from the writings of St Paul which have strengthened me in my moments of doubt as both a layman and as a member of the clergy and hope may be of help to you. In his letter to the Romans he writes these words concerning Israel's rejection of Christ and her ultimate inclusion in the plan of salvation: "The call and the will of God are irrevocable." This does not mean that the plan for our lives is written 'in the stars', as we say, or fatalistically and that we do not have to struggle to confirm our calling in Christ. But it reassures

us that God is with us in our fight, that we have made the right decision and have received the gifts he intended for us and will bring them to fruition whether we be ordained or laity, under a monastic vow or not, single, divorced or married. The path to salvation is carefully laid out by God for us in our best interests and by calling on him with prayer and fasting we work with him to 'run the race which he has set before us'. He is ever present to help us as he too has experienced our human condition in the flesh. "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every way has been tested as we are, yet without sin," writes the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

In another place St Paul writes in connection with the contributions of the Greek churches to the mother church, "If the readiness is there it is acceptable according to what a man has not according to what he has not". We can and should all give to the Church of Christ but we can only give what we have in terms of our talents or gifts - spiritual, psychological, educational, musical, material etc. The small measure that we can offer is a sacrifice pleasing to God but we must prepare our hearts to be ready when called upon to make it.

The third text is one which is very dear to me. "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness." St Paul appeals to the Lord three times to remove his particular 'thorn in the flesh' and receives this unexpected and un hoped-for answer. But then he considers the idea of weakness along with his countless other hardships and realises that God works in this way and that weakness is actually strength.

And that brings us back to the Mother of God who, though apparently weak and humbled in her life, becomes the most powerful advocate in heaven for the Church of her Son on earth. Her simple response of assent to the invitation of the Father changes the world fundamentally. But we have failed to mention the most dominant theme of today's feast which is joy. "My spirit has rejoiced in God, my Saviour," she cries out in the hymn of the Magnificat as she embarks on her new mission in God. That joy is given to all of us as we resolve deeply within ourselves to offer some new service to Christ, whether small or great.

So, let us draw close to the Mother of God today as we celebrate this radiant feast, to share her joy at God's visitation and her assent to his will which changed the world. And let us look expectantly for the call within us during this time of the fast to make an offering to bring the light of Christ more visibly to the world around us. Amen.

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