



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fourth Sunday of Advent

readings: [2 Samuel 7 1-11,16](#); [Romans 16 25-27](#); [Luke 1 26-38](#).

24 December 2023

Herbert Morrison, the Labour politician and Home Secretary during the Second World War, had a little list. It was a list he always carried around with him. Indeed when he died in 1965, it was found carefully folded in his suit top pocket. It was his 8 choices of music ready prepared for when he was invited onto Desert Island Discs. But the invitation never came.

I too have never been invited on to Desert Island Discs, but it can only be a matter of time, because they seem to have had everyone else, and I am equally prepared. For I identified my 8 records in an article for Cathedral Outlook in 2017, by kind invitation of the Editor. And I have already identified the book (other than the Bible or Shakespeare) to take with me: "Lord of the Rings" by J. R. R. Tolkien. It's a big book, well over 1000 pages in paperback, a story of the triumph of good over evil, of the little folk over the great and powerful, a parable still resonant in our troubled times. But for me the most moving episode in it is when the Great Council of State is agonising over what to do with the Ring of Power which has come into their possession and must be destroyed for the good of the world, and it is Frodo the Hobbit, the smallest and apparently the weakest, who accepts the call, and says: "*I will take the Ring, although I do not know the way*". And so he sets out on a journey, a journey into the unknown, a journey of faith, a journey of hope, a journey which will save the world.

On a far greater scale, in fact and not in fiction, a journey begins tomorrow, Christmas Day, a journey of faith and hope, the journey of a small and unexpected baby, the illegitimate son of an unmarried peasant girl in a Middle Eastern backwater occupied by a foreign power, a journey from birth in a stable, to death on a cross, to resurrection in glory, a journey that will indeed save the world.

And it is Mary, called by God to play her part in that great journey, who although bewildered and afraid, believed and obeyed: "Let it be according to your word".

There are two things about being called by God: you must be prepared to say "Yes!" and you must not say "Why me?". For do not be surprised when God chooses the apparently most unlikely person for his great purpose.

You must be prepared to say "Yes!"

For Mary's consent was necessary if God's plan was to be fulfilled. Incredible as it seems, God needs our co-operation. He calls...but it is up to us if we respond.

And Mary's response was firm; her co-operation was given without hesitation and in quiet obedience: what St Paul in our NT lesson from Romans calls "the obedience of faith", a response of acceptance and of trust. Notice that it is "acceptance", which is very different from "resignation" which sometimes passes for it. Here is no passive resignation to fate, no putting up with the bum deal that you think life has thrown at you. Here is acceptance based on trust: trust in God and trust that he knows what he is doing. Trust that with God, nothing will be impossible.

No doubt it was because of that trust in God that Mary was able to make such a great act of acceptance at such an early age: acceptance that was to lead to trials and sorrows, from the social opprobrium of being thought unfaithful to her betrothed, to the final agony of a mother seeing her son publicly and agonisingly executed.

Being chosen by God can mean acceptance of hard and painful things, because he doesn't call us and choose us for our own satisfaction and comfort, but for a task that has to be done.

Evelyn Waugh in his *Sword of Honour* trilogy has his protagonist Guy Crouchback reflect on being called. He writes: *"In the recesses of Guy's conscience there lay the belief that somewhere, somehow, something would be required of him; that he must be attentive to the summons when it came. One day he would get the chance to do some small service which only he could perform, for which he had been created. Even he must have his function in the divine plan. All that mattered was to recognise the chance when it offered, and to pray 'show me what to do, and help me to do it'".*

That must have been how it was for Mary too. She was called, and she accepted in "the obedience of faith", holding nothing back and stepping forward willingly into the dark. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

And you must not say "Why me?" For being chosen by God can be unexpected, as God has a habit of choosing the most unlikely vehicles to fulfil his purpose. If we with our worldly values had expected God to send his Son amongst us, we might have looked for him first amongst the monarchs, the rulers, the politicians (perhaps not!) but certainly amongst the well-educated and the affluent. We would have forgotten what St Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Cor 1 26-28) that paradoxically God chooses and uses what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise; what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful; what the world looks down on and despises and thinks is nothing, in order to destroy what the world thinks is important.

So he chooses and uses a young Middle Eastern peasant girl, and God's Son comes not as a nice meek European but as a swarthy revolutionary Jew.

When we holidayed in Avignon some years ago, we saw the famous painting by the Renaissance artist Botticelli of the "Virgin and Child" much beloved of Christmas card designers. But Renaissance painters got it wrong with their angels and marble pillars, their sanitised crib in which a chubby little well-washed baby Jesus sucks his thumb whilst a nice clean ox, well behaved donkey and whiter-than-white lamb look approvingly on. Think again: it wasn't like that. It was dirty, squalid and cold.... and not at all nice.

But there is one thing the Renaissance painters did get right and that is the calm serenity they show on the face of Mary as she looks at her new-born son. This is what acceptance is; this is what blessedness is: the blessedness of accepting God's call to be the mother of Jesus, the blessedness of being able to trust, knowing that for God nothing is impossible, the blessedness of rejoicing in God as Saviour. No wonder she was able to say in the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices..."

And you can see why Mary rejoiced: God was going to take a lot of trouble with his world, and she had been chosen, unlikely though she was, to be His partner in that great venture.

And God is still taking trouble with his world...and still calling for partners.

Our own call may not come to us as dramatically as it did to Mary, or indeed as demandingly. But it will come.

It may come whilst we are at prayer, or at worship; in the silence of the wee small hours or in the noisy bustle of our daily tasks. It may be a call to small things that will incrementally advance the Kingdom in quiet service, or to one great work of witness.

But when it comes, we will know, and all then we have to do is to accept our calling with the obedience of faith, and just get on with it.

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