

The Fourth Sunday of Advent 2011.

He began life as a forgotten shepherd boy and ended up as a King. If you go to Jerusalem you can visit the ruins of the City of David, which include the ruins of his house. Once settled with prosperity and relative stability, David turned his attention to the Ark of God. The Ark, which was the place of God's presence, had remained in a special tent during the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land. Now David thinks that he ought to build a house for God. As it turned out, God had other ideas and pointed out to David that if there was any building to be done, God would be doing it for David and his people and not the other way round. In fact it was David's son Solomon who built God a house which became the Temple in Jerusalem.

Somehow David had got it wrong. Could it have been in his motives for building God a house? Could there have been the remotest temptation to think that if he built a house for God, then God would continue to look after him and keep him the way he wanted to be. As things turned out for the people of Israel the idea of controlling God and keeping him in his house became the very thing that kept them away from God.

It's strange how human beings and people like King David can be so wrong about God. That idea, still around, that if we do the right things that God will be kind to us; do the wrong things and God will punish us. How often do I hear the expression when things do go wrong, "what have I done to deserve this?"

Things may go wrong, and God does not have a problem about being blamed, but that is not the way to see God or to understand him. God created us out of love and he created us to be free and to grow to fullness and perfection. He wants us to have life and joy to the full and he is not waiting around for us to do wrong so that he can punish us.

Freedom, the fullness and completion of life and human flourishing is God's mysterious purpose for each and all us together. Paul was one of the first Christians to realise this and says that Jesus and his promise was a mystery kept secret for endless ages until it all became clear in the person of Jesus. So clear and obvious that it must be made known to every human being. The Word and promise of God became a real event for us all in the person of Jesus.

The one person who was able to appreciate perfectly this mystery and secret was Mary the Lord's mother. That is why she is offered to us as our model and pattern for Christian perfection. As a Jewish woman she was well aware of her people's faith in God and how he had been with them through all the centuries of their history. She knew their fears but she was able to set them aside and come to see that God was most perfectly about love. St. Luke tells us that following the angel Gabriel's message Mary was perplexed and pondered what the message could mean. In pondering, which grew out of her faith in God, Mary came to see that as one who loves perfectly, God desired to come utterly close to his people. Look at the history of the Jewish people and see that the time was right for such a hope. Notice what happened, Mary

heard the Word of God, she pondered it, wrestled with it and questioned. Then, somehow in that spiritual and emotional tussle, she handed herself over to God in the knowledge and faith that if she could be his servant then he would bring fulfilment to her life. So it was, that in perfect freedom and love, without the manipulation that comes from fear and anxiety, Mary said “let what you have said be done to me.” And the Word and Son of God became her Son changing the course of our history for ever. On Mary’s yes depended the completion and fulfilment of God’s purpose for creation and humanity.

True, as the Angel tells her, Mary was “highly favoured”. She was chosen and set apart for this remarkable experience and mission. While all this is true, her message and example is that we must live life the way that she lived hers.

**She was perplexed and pondered the angel’s words.** Her questioning would have involved her whole life, her whole story and that of her people. But in all that she heard clearly the message of God for her. That has to be the starting point for us if she is to be our model. All of us are perplexed, all of us wonder where God is in our experience, all of us want to be free in the truest sense and all of us want to grow to be the creatures and persons that God intends. In the confusion and disturbance of our lives we must find time and space to believe that God loves us and wants the best for us. Somehow the confusion and perplexity of life is precisely where God is speaking to us and showing us the way forward. He is not punishing us, he is not indiscriminately inflicting confusion on us, he is leading us through trust into greater and deeper humanity.

**The angel says to Mary that the Holy Spirit will overshadow you, will come upon you and we know that the same Spirit brought about a new creation within her.** The same Holy Spirit overshadows us and he is the source of all life and creativity. Mary was completely open to his gift so that the Holy Spirit could enter her life and complete her desire and gift to him of her service. The same is true for us. If we open our lives in trust to the Spirit of God then all our hopes and actions, our lives lived in love, our joys and sorrows will be completed and brought to glory for, as the angel says to Mary, nothing is impossible to God.

**Having pondered the angel message and filled, as she was with the Spirit of God, Mary makes her response: “I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me.”** This is the real challenge for us. Mary, using the courage and strength that God had given her, put her life entirely in God’s hands so that he could use her for his purpose. We are called to do the same. To renounce our own petty schemes and plans and place all our gifts and energies, our capacity to hope and dream in the Lord’s hands so that he can use us to further his Kingdom.

