

Advent 4B

We've just heard in the Gospel today the account of the Annunciation. Since God the Son is to become man, He opts to be conceived, born and nurtured like every other mortal. He identifies wholly with the human condition and that includes all the 'not so nice bits' like temptation, rejection, suffering and death.

God so respects human freedom that he first seeks Mary's consent before He proceeds with His plan. He also seeks our co-operation before he can work in and through us. Christianity is a divine-human partnership.

From the Angel's standpoint there is no arm-twisting going on to force Mary's hand. Spirituality is about our free choices merging with God's overall plan for us. Our 'yes' to God, like Mary's, must, however, be wholehearted. Not 'yes' today and 'maybe' tomorrow.

Her 'yes' to God, wasn't 'plain sailing' at least from a human point of view. Even though the Angel addressed her as one 'highly favoured', there was flip side. The circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus prove this point. The 'highly favoured' Mary was left to give birth to Jesus in a cave where animals sheltered. Pope Benedict said that *'Jesus was born in a stable in order to humble human pride'. To emphasise this point the shepherds who weren't even allowed to attend the synagogue because they slept rough, were the first to hear of Christ's birth.*

If we were giving Mary advice we would probably have strongly advised her not to attempt to leave Nazareth in the first place - in her state it would be insane to set out on such a hazardous journey of roughly 90 miles to Bethlehem which would take over a week if not more. She could lose the baby. There was no public transport then. Caesar and his census could wait. But

God's ways are not our ways. Mary put God first in her life and didn't allow herself to be swayed by mundane considerations. The Christmas message of peace and goodwill can only find a home in the hearts of people humble enough to put God first in their lives. John the Baptist uses more figurative language to drive home the same point – '*every valley will be filled in every mountain laid low*'. We must let the mountains of pride, arrogance and lust be toppled and allow the valleys of our fears, and lack faith to be filled in. Then the words of John the Baptist will come to fruition in us.

The tyrant King Herod brought Mary and Joseph a lot of grief as well when he sought to end the life of their new-born, but with God on their side they outfox the wicked King. So also did the wise men. It's the same with us. God will turn everything to the advantage of those who love Him even when things initially turn a bit pear-shaped for us. He can 'write straight on crooked lines' as he did for Mary and Joseph.

So Mary's 'yes' to God was never diluted from the day she first uttered it to the Angel Gabriel to when she bravely stood by the cross of her dying Son. She will help elicit and bolster our 'yes' to God as well.