

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent – St Paul’s Manuka – 24 December, 2017.****2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16****Song of Mary****Romans 16: 25-27****Luke 1: 26-38**

Today in our Gospel passage we hear of the obedience of Mary. She submitted herself to the will of God and became the Christ-bearer, the mother of our Lord, and in so doing she believed she was acting rightly. By the power of the Holy Spirit she became pregnant and gave birth to Jesus – the Christ, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas time.

Mary was not unthinking even though she was obedient. She submitted to the will of God but she did seek clarification. ‘How can this be’, she said, ‘since I am a virgin’. Christians have pondered this question for thousands of years. How can someone be pregnant and have a baby through normal human birth and yet not conceive in the normal manner?

The Gospel of Luke which we have read this morning tells us that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of God overshadowed her and as a result Mary was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. It seems that Mary’s pregnancy was like other human pregnancies and yet the cause of that pregnancy was so different to other human pregnancies. Mary would have experienced the same joys and pains of pregnancy and birth but knew within herself that it was different as well. She knew that the child she bore would be called holy and would be the Son of God. All this is a matter of faith not medical science.

Here is true submission then on the part of Mary and acknowledgement of the plan of God. Here is Mary realising that she is part of something much bigger than herself and being prepared to be the servant who follows the plan of God. It could not have been easy for Mary.

There was Mary, sitting at home, visited by the angel Gabriel who gives her the most amazing message – she is to conceive and bear a son, whom she will call Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord will give Him the throne of his ancestor David. Pretty amazing stuff she must have thought – especially when we consider that Mary was a peasant, probably only about 14 years old, had very little experience outside her hometown of Nazareth, practically no education and lived in a morally conservative society.

Mary's doubt and seeking for clarification is easy to understand. Your doubt and mine are real and things that can paralyse us. Doubt is the thing that prevents us from receiving the onrush of the Holy Spirit and making the choice that God wills. If Mary had said: 'No way, I'm not having any of that', well maybe things would have been a little different in God's plan for the salvation of the world. But Mary didn't say that. In spite of the doubt in herself and her abilities, in spite even of her questioning of God, her 'since I am a virgin', she went forward on the journey of faith – the Spirit came and filled her whole life. She made the choice of God's will and things were never the same again. It was not her ability or lack of it that mattered, it was her choice that mattered so much and it was the power of God that overshadowed her and led her on in obedience.

Mary's choice let the Holy Spirit overpower and overshadow her. God overcame what she saw as her lack of ability. Mary chose to say 'yes' to God. Mary's supposed lack of ability was overshadowed by her willing choice to be the servant of the Lord.

As we come to Christmas we know that God makes some big choices – the coming of God's very self into our world in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is the message of Christmas. It is about God's choice to be one of us and to be committed to us in the biggest way that God can do. There are no half measures with God – it's all with God or it's nothing.

But we have choices too. We are so much like Mary. Mary is for us, as she always has been for Christians a prophetic model. God comes to each of us at Christmas, like God came to Mary, and we have the choice of how we respond to that presence. We can reject that presence of God or we can say like Mary: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord'.

It is when we respond as Mary did that God overpowers and overshadows us and overcomes what we see as our lack of ability and it is then that we proclaim the greatness of the Lord. God's power comes with peace, with direction, with faith, with grace, with love and with the very presence of Jesus. Don't imagine that this is always easy. Mary found that Gabriel's message brought her not only joy but also pain. Mary's choice left things in God's hands though, but she did not just sit on her hands doing nothing and waiting for God to do all the work. She made choices and this meant work, she became the Mother of the Lord. She followed God's will. The Christian life is like that. We can give ourselves to God in obedience but that does not mean it is all beer and skittles. There is work for us to do on

our own spiritual journey. We need the grace of God through the Scriptures and the sacraments so that we have food for the journey of faith. We face our own problems and difficulties and yet in the midst of all that we know that the arms of God are beneath us, holding us in a relationship of love which is powerful and full of the peace of God which passes all understanding.

Christmas if anything at all confronts with the reality of God among us. Jesus comes and stands starkly before us. Like Mary that presence did not go away. It grew and matured and Mary had a job to do in being the mother of the Lord. Like Mary, God comes to us and asks us to do things. We can say: 'How can this be, since I am only .....?' and make ourselves inert. We can fall back on our lack of ability whatever that might be, even though it is never enough or we can face the fact that God has already made a choice to change us and the world in Jesus. Or, like Mary, we can make the choice to follow obediently, questioning yes, doubtful yes, but not powerless. Once we have made the choice for God, God supplies the power and the ability through the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray this day for obedience to the will of God but let us also pray that we do not let our vision of that obedience become the pain of someone else.