

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Advent 2023 Year B

The readings for the past weeks of Advent are designed to prepare us for the coming feast of Christmas. They have reminded us, in the words of the great prophets of the Old Testament, of the eternal plans of God's loving heart, to save His people. They have placed before us the eloquent and urgent pleadings of generation after generation for the coming of the Messiah, God's gift of Himself to us in the person of Christ his Son.

And now, just before we celebrate the great feast of that gift, the birth of Christ our Saviour, the Gospel today reminds us of an important event without which there would not have been a Christmas.

All gifts are freely given as a sign of the giver's love, but a true gift can never be forced upon someone; they are open to acceptance or rejection.

Today's Gospel shows us the amazing delicacy of a God, who so respected man's freedom, that He had to stand back, suspend all His plans and preparations for Salvation History, and wait for the free consent of Mary to the gift of her unique place in His plan.

She could have said "No", for in realistic terms to say "Yes" would involve tremendous pain and difficulty for a young girl of that time and culture. The public shame and censure of being a young, unmarried pregnant woman. The deep hurt to Joseph and her family whose love and trust she would appear to have betrayed. Who would ever believe her?

And yet, from somewhere, she drew upon an enormous reserve of generosity and faith and was able to take that huge leap into the dark. She was able to say "Yes" and allow the will of God to work within her for the benefit of all mankind.

Some of the words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary can hold an important lesson for each one of us, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you".

Like Mary, there are in our lives significant moments for the potential growth of the life of God within us.

The Holy Spirit, the boundless Power of God, hovers over us and waits for our free consent, our own personal “Yes” to enable it into our lives.

The great difficulty is that we often do have to experience those moments of potential growth as moments of darkness and shadow. The creative power of God always cast a shadow over that which it hovers. God can be at his most creative in our lives in times of darkness and shadow.

Now it can take a tremendous act of faith to see the potential power of God hovering in the shadow moments of our lives, and having seen that, to then be prepared to take a tremendous leap and say “Yes”, to allow God's creative power to operate within us in those moments of darkness and pain.

In the very first act of Creation, we read of the Spirit of God, the Power of God, hovering over the face of the chaos, darkness, and disorder.

Then there is God’s free consent, “Yes, let there be light”, and from that moment of consent the Power of God works creatively. It brings light out of the darkness, order out of the chaos, and new life and potential out of nothingness and negativity.

The dark shadowy moments of our lives are difficult and various. It could be deep unhappiness; a sense of despair; the feeling of no hope or point to life; a loss of religious faith; pain; illness; the approach of death or the death of a loved one. All that pain and darkness, whatever it may be, is negative and destructive inside us.

But, if we can gain, through our experience of life, a disciplined habit of being able to take a step back when we are in a moment of shadow and darkness. If we can look through the eyes of faith at our situation and see the creative presence of God as a part of that shadow. Then if, like Mary, we can say “Yes”, and allow God's creative spirit to work with us in our pain and darkness, then like Mary too, there will well up in our heart a profound peace, joy and confidence that the pain of darkness or shadow cannot quench.

If we can learn that generosity of spirit to cooperate with the creative power of God in our lives, then we will learn the truth of the Great Christian paradox, that out of sadness, we can bring joy, that out of despair we can bring hope, out of faintheartedness we can bring perseverance and out of death itself we can pass to a new and eternal life.