

An Address by Ash Leighton Plom, 20 December 2020 - 4th Sunday of Advent

Prophecy and free will, that's what I want to talk to you about today. God's foretold plan of salvation on the one hand: the prophesied birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as St. Paul puts it, "disclosed" or "revealed" "through the prophetic writings". And on the other hand, Mary's freely offered "let it be with me according to your word", what's called her "fiat" in Latin, her humble "yes" of availability to God's purposes.

Prophecy and free will. I want to start by saying there is an open debate between these two poles, and a range of views exist in the Church over the exact relationship between God's foretelling of events then bringing them to pass, and our free agency as human beings, our free will to make choices.

It's also fair to say there are comforts to be found in both emphases. For example, on the prophecy side, faith in God's sovereignty can be a comfort. If we trust that God has foreknowledge and brings things to pass, that his plan is good and will eventually be worked out, we don't need to worry too much about things like the decisions we make. Even if we make a wrong decision, all is not lost. God is able to set things back on the right course, and bring about his good purpose. I can think of a few misteps in my own life which I believe I've seen God straighten out after the event. Perhaps you know a few from your own experience?

This cosmic reality means we can go into life each day trusting that a loving God is faithfully working in everything for the good of those that love him. (Romans 8:28 says, "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." God works in all things for our good, even when we can't see it!)

Then there's comfort in the 'free will' position, as well: we are empowered, with free choice, like Mary. It's much commented on by bible scholars that, in the gospel reading we've just had, Mary was free to choose, and chose freely. So this means *people* – Mary, me, you – are not just robots following a pre-programmed path, slavishly trapped to obey the diktats of a tyrannical god. No, we are invited to choose, to make decisions, to exercise sovereignty in our own free will.

Somehow, in scripture and Christian belief, God's sovereignty over history on the one hand, and our free will to make choices on the other, coexist. Both ontologies, or realities, are ultimately true.

So, going too far on either side of the debate can result in unhelpful confusions. For example, a sensible, orthodox Christian belief in God's sovereignty is not the same as a resigned fatalism, that denies humans any free will at all. Even though St. Paul describes the gospel as "revealed" through the prophetic writings, Luke's gospel suggests Mary's yes was a free one. But equally, an orthodox Christian belief in free will does not mean God has abandoned us to the consequences of all our bad decisions. The scriptures say he is at work, fulfilling his will, bringing to pass good promises.

I think the scriptures we've heard this morning exhibit this tension, this balance: between Paul's sense that the coming of Christ fulfilled God's sovereignly foretold plan, and Mary's "let it be done", offered of her own free will.

Earlier this year, I listened to a homily by the Vatican's Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin, in which he encouraged Christians to freely choose to mimic Mary's free choice to be available to do the will of God. Cardinal Parolin invites us to live "our love for the Lord in our daily lives", by putting into action *our* "yes" to do God's will.

Now, this is where what might seem like just a philosophical question, God's sovereignty vs our free will, impacts on your life, and the lives of those around you.

Cardinal Parolin commented that Mary's humble "yes" shows us that, "the history of salvation does not follow the golden paths of the sensational (*sensationa*), but is carried out through the... the ordinary rhythm of human life, in the demanding paths of reality."

The "mission of God is realised... through the generous availability" of his people, like Mary, and like me, and like you.

Mary's choice to say "yes" to God, changed the course of world history, her freely given "let it be so" fulfilled God's plan of salvation. A humble girl in an ordinary town changed the world with a simple "yes".

I think this shows that ordinary, day-to-day human life, my life, your life, is important to God. It is exactly where he chooses to act to work out his will, and even fulfil his plan of salvation. As Cardinal Parolin put it: "Jesus does not stand outside of human history: on the contrary, He enters into it."

We are now in the final march towards Christmas, when we will celebrate the birth of our saviour, in very humble circumstances, humanly speaking – a manger, a feeding trough, certainly not a “sensational” palace or the like.

So today, let’s dwell on Mary’s humble “let it be unto me”, “let it be as you say”, her choice to say “yes” to God’s plan. St. Anselm captures the significance of Mary’s "yes" in these words, from the 11th Century:

“Blessed Lady! Sky and stars, earth and rivers, day and night — everything — rejoice that through you they are restored and endowed with new grace.

The world... was corrupted.

[But] Now all creation has been restored to life...

Lady, full and overflowing with grace, all creation receives new life from your abundance.

God, then, is the Father of the created world,
and Mary the mother of the recreated world.

God is the Father by whom all things were given life,
and Mary the mother through whom all things were given new life.

For God begot the Son, through whom all things were made,
and Mary gave birth to him as the Saviour of the world.”

If God can use Mary’s humble yes to enact his plan of salvation, I wonder what he can do with your “yes”, this Christmas, and into the New Year. I suppose my prayer is that we will each have faith like Mary's, to say yes to what God asks of us.

Like Anselm, St. Irenaeus tells us that through Mary’s choice to be available to do the will of God, the whole of creation throughout history, including each and every one of us, are offered reanimation.

Mary’s humble yes had extraordinary consequences, and I just wonder, what is God inviting you to say yes to, today? Can you like and share our Facebook page? Can you give time, money, or skills to a godly charity or cause? Can you bring a friend to church - safely distanced - at all? Or check in on someone who's lonely this Christmas?

I’ll finish with a poem from St Augustine of Hippo, which again echoes what God did through Mary’s yes:

“God so loved us that for our sakes he,
through whom time was made, was made in time;
older by eternity than the world itself,
he became younger in age than many of his servants in the world;
God, who made man, was made man;
he was given existence by a mother
whom he brought into existence;
he was carried in hands which he formed;
he was nursed at breasts which he filled;
he cried like a baby in the manger in speechless infancy—
this Word without which human eloquence is speechless.”
Amen.