

4th Sunday of Advent

Year B

Mary, The Ark Of God's Covenant.

Today's Mass is a great song to the everlasting love of God revealed in his covenant (love-pact) with his people.

*We praise the mystery of his love kept secret for endless ages,
but now revealed through a new ark of the covenant, Mary of Nazareth.*

(Reading: 2 Samuel 7: 1-5, 8-12, 14,16. Romans 16: 25-27. Luke 1: 26-38.)

When it comes to the natural human graces, what some might refer to as human talents, there are those who seem to have an extra, almost unfair abundance. I'm talking about those who are academically bright, or creatively artistic: those who are especially kind, or are particularly good to be around, those very pleasant and congenial people who are always sought after, attracting untold numbers of friends.

Conversely, there are countless people who work all their lives for the talents that others seem to have naturally or acquire effortlessly. These are the less 'fortunate' people; those who endlessly struggle for all their worth; those who endure inhuman diets, seeking to conform with the advertiser's concept of 'the-body-beautiful'; those who desperately try to attract, or to please, to say the right thing, whilst wearing a perpetual smile; those, who, for all their efforts, seem to be overlooked, for one reason or another.

It reminds me of a type of fairy tale, which tells of a rich and powerful prince, seeking to win the heart of the beautiful princess. He tries every trick and wily charm he can think of to woo her, but to no avail, for she has her eyes firmly fixed on another.

To the prince's utter dismay, the princess ends up marrying a penniless woodcutter who, as far as anyone can tell, does nothing to win her favour. She simply gives her heart to the woodcutter because of love's mysterious, unfathomable preference.

The rejected prince is left wondering why he couldn't *earn* the love of the beautiful princess. After all, he had done all the right things. Similarly, just as in the case of the poor bewildered prince, when we see how some people are *chosen*, we cannot help but wonder: "What on earth does she see in him", or "He's far too good for her.

We presume that they must have *done* something special. And we get all tangled up in trying to understand, to scrutinise their performance for some clue. But, in all this, we forget the freedom of the one who did the choosing in the first place.

In today's Gospel we celebrate the extravagant and unfathomable love of God, who freely chose Mary to be the mother of his beloved Son. – And God's choice of Mary made her "*full of grace*". – If grace is God's gift, then Mary was most surely filled with his gifts. That being so, it is completely pointless to wonder what Mary did to deserve such special attention. And it is idle to ask why she was given such special love from God. It is pointless, and it is idle, because she didn't do anything to deserve it. It was simply God's, own, divine gift.

Consider, nobody *deserves* gifts; nobody is *entitled* to favours. Gifts and favours reflect the generosity of the giver, not the worthiness of the receiver. The Gospel does not begin with what Mary does; it begins with what God does through her.

When Mary is chosen to be the mother of God's Only Begotten-Son, his choice of her is not a reward for some service done. Nor is it an answer to Mary's prayer. Rather, God's choice of Mary is the result of his divine freedom to choose anyone he wants; to choose Mary from among all women. And when God chooses Mary, his *choice* makes her worthy, just as his love makes her full of grace. – This truth is reflected in the words of the Magnificat, when Mary proclaims:

My soul glorifies the *Lord*
and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour
because *He* has looked on the lowliness of his handmaid.
Yes, from this day forward,
all generations will call me blessed,
for the *Almighty* has done great things for me.

Because of God's own, mysterious preference; because he has chosen to look upon Mary with favour; because he has made her full of grace, all generations call her blessed – as we do today. God *graced* Mary for a mission that was, is, not for herself. Her mission in God's creative plan was, and continues to be, that she should give Jesus to each, and every, generation of the human family.

That said, some people, particularly in this, our, generation, have argued that, because Mary was so full of grace – that because she was so gifted by God – she was no longer really human, that she somehow became a Fourth person in the Trinitarian Godhead.

Well, clearly Mary *was* human. And yet, she does have a unique role in history. As the Church teaches, she 'occupies a place in the Church which is the highest after Christ and closest to us.'

(Lumen Gentium, 54)

Being 'chosen' by God for such a task, however special Mary is, does not exclude her from the human race. God's choice of her does not compel her to choose God. Mary was *asked* to put her freedom, her whole self, at the service of God's plan. And she agreed! The real difference between Mary and us, isn't that she was chosen while we are not; it is that she *fully* responded to having been chosen for her role, whereas we remain hesitant and half-hearted about responding to what God asks of us. In truth, God has chosen *all* of us. And this great truth is expressed by St Paul in his 1st letter to the Ephesians, when he writes:

"God chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless
and to live through love in his presence". *(Ephesians 1)*

Like Mary, we face God's choice of us. And like her, we are challenged to say yes. – If only we could see ourselves as the result of God's choice, rather than as walking, talking mistakes, we might be keener, more willing to say yes!

God has chosen each and every one of us. And he has a role for each and every one of us. He merely waits for our choice, our response, that puts our freedom at his service. Without doubt, God's word to Mary in today's Gospel is of peerless, supreme value: "Rejoice, highly favoured". – He gifted her to be holy.

It may be that you don't think you are talented or gifted of God's favours. It may be that you think you are not really worth anything. And if that is what you think, then listen again to God's word, for it is addressed to you too:

"Rejoice, highly favoured, for I have chosen you to be holy."