

English Carol Service Meditation

Eglise de St Martin, Villy en Auxois, 14/12/2008.

There are some tremendous moments described for us in the Bible passages that we read in the traditional 'seven lessons of advent' service.

Perhaps my favourite is the one taken from Luke's gospel chapter 1, where the story of the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary is recounted. There is a tremendous 'moment' in that story.

Since mankind rejected God and turned their back on Him, God had been working to open up the possibility of reconciliation.

God called Abraham, chose him to be the father of a new people - the Jewish people.

Over hundreds of years this people grew bigger and bigger. But then they ended up slaves to the Egyptian Pharaohs. After 400 years God sends Moses. He leads them out from their captivity and into the desert. God gives them a structure for their society based the Law - the Torah - and they become not just a people but a nation - the Jewish nation.

Then Joshua leads this people, probably a million strong by now, into the Promised Land and the nation becomes a state - the Jewish state, the land of Israel.

To this nation, over hundreds of years, God sends prophets. These prophets bring messages from God. Messages designed to prepare the people for a new thing that God is going to do. God is going to send someone - the Messiah, the Christ. Someone who will lead mankind into a new way of relating to God. Someone who will open up the possibility of mankind's reconciliation with God.

Finally after thousands of years of preparation the time comes. God sends Gabriel to Mary. Gabriel makes his announcement to Mary that she is the one chosen by God to give birth to this Messiah and then the whole universe holds its breath.

What will Mary say? Yes or No?

God won't force her. God has granted man the honour of free will. We have the capacity to choose our own destiny. We can say Yes or No to God. So what will Mary say?

What a moment!!

Everything hangs in the balance. All God's plans. Thousands of years of God's activity in human history can all be brought to nothing. The whole future of the human race rest in the hands of Mary - and who is she? A 16 year old, peasant girl from Northern Palestine!

It's unthinkable! That God should place his plans in such jeopardy! All turning on the choice of a 16 year old peasant girl!

But God respects human choices. He honours men and women by letting them choose. And so God - and the whole universe waits...

Happily Mary's response is positive, " I am the Lord's servant May it be to me as you have said". And that choice has some incredible consequences.

Because of Mary's choice Jesus is born.

Because of Mary's choice Jesus reveals God's character of love to mankind in a new way.

Because of Mary's choice Jesus is able to give his life on a cross as a means of opening up the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Because of Mary's choice Jesus is able to rise from the dead proving that death need not be the end for mankind, but rather a glorious new beginning.

Because of Mary's choice 2,000 years later, and on the other side of the world, I stand before you today and honour her name.

An incredible moment of choice with incredible consequences.

Now I don't imagine that any of us will be asked by God to play such an important a role in salvation history as Mary was, but nonetheless each of us will, like Mary, have to give our Yes or our No to God throughout our lives.

We do this in two different ways:

Key Moments - There are moments in our lives when we make key decisions about how we are going to relate to God.

- Will we take part in Christian worship - will we seek God's presence in his church on a regular basis?

- Will we read the Bible? Will we try to take seriously God's revelation to man about himself and about us and the meaning and significance of our lives and about how we can live successfully?

- Will we pray? Will we invite God's presence into the circumstances of our lives and ask for his leading and guiding? Will we express our gratitude to God for all the blessing that we enjoy by saying grace before meals?

Little Moments - Also, every day in little ways we say Yes or No to God 10's or dozens of times. In the situations in which we find ourselves in life, we can choose to behave in a way that pleases God or not.

- In relationships - if someone speaks angrily to us, will we give a gentle answer, try to see the others person's point of view? Or will we take offence, get angry ourselves and respond in kind?

- In marriage - Will we be faithful to our partner or unfaithful? Will we be a loving, caring husband or wife or not?

- In business - Will we be honest and fair with customers and competitors or not?

- In family life - When my boys were little, I would come home exhausted and collapse on the sofa. My boys would run up with a book shouting "Daddy, Daddy read us a story". Now the last thing I really wanted to do was to read 'the Cat in the Hat' for the 437th time that week! Do I push my children away? Or do I say come and sit on my lap and we'll read the story.

You see, in all our choices - the great and the small - and all the way through our lives, we are giving our 'Yes' or our 'No' to God.

Someone once wrote that God doesn't send anyone to Hell, He merely gives people what they have chosen.

If we spend our whole lives constantly saying No to God, rejecting every opportunity to draw close to Him, to be reconciled to Him, then ultimately God will have no option but to respect our choice and we will be separated fully and finally from Him throughout eternity.

If, however, we spend our lives trying to say Yes to God. Seeking to draw close to Him, taking advantage of all that God has done in and through Jesus to open up to us the possibility of reconciliation - then God will grant us that which we have been seeking and we will spend eternity living in His presence.

May, this Christmas, Mary's example encourage us to think seriously about the choices we are all making everyday. May we find grace and courage so that more and more our response to God will be Yes rather than No.

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