

Mary's Question
4th Sunday of Advent (B)
(Lk 1:26-38)

In this final Sunday before Christmas, the Church turns her attention to Mary, the one closest to the Christmas mystery, through whom Christmas comes about. God's entire plan of salvation depends on Mary. Without her there would be no Incarnation. As Eve misused her freedom to bring the fruit of sin into the world, Mary must use her freedom to bring the fruit of Christ. It is not that Mary accomplishes God's mighty work, but that He does not perform His work without her free consent. Therefore the whole world anxiously awaits Mary's reply to the Angel Gabriel. St. Bernard of Clairvaux meditates on the momentous import of this response (Hom. 4, 8-9):

You have heard, O Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits an answer; it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion; the sentence of condemnation weighs heavily upon us.

The price of our salvation is offered to you. We shall be set free at once if you consent. In the eternal Word of God we all came to be, and behold, we die. In your brief response we are to be remade in order to be recalled to life.

Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family begs this of you, O loving Virgin, in their exile from Paradise. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race.

Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel, or rather through the angel to the Lord. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal Word.

Mary does not answer the angel at once when he explains that she will conceive and bear a son. She is disturbed by his message, but her confusion is not over the incredible news that the child to be conceived will be the great long-awaited Messiah: "*he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*" Instead, she questions the angel about her virginity: "*how can this be, since I do not know man?*" (Lk 1:34). This is a very strange response. After all, it should not come as a great surprise to a young woman about to be

married that she would soon “conceive and bear a son.” Unless there is something more to this marriage.

The back-story to Mary’s question is not given in the Gospel of Luke, but tradition from the early Church¹ has handed on other important information about Mary. From her infancy and early childhood, Mary was dedicated to God and had made a vow of total consecration to Him in the temple.² Undoubtedly angels have been with her and her parents Joachim and Anna from the beginning, guiding every step of her unique and holy life. Mary’s betrothal was carefully arranged with this in mind. Joseph was a faithful and righteous man who would be her guardian and provider, understanding the unique arrangements of their marriage to preserve Mary’s holy vocation to virginity.

Thus it is that Mary questions the angel. His reply explains how this new request from God will not contradict His earlier calling to virginity: “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God*” (Lk 1:35). Jesus will be “Son of God,” because he will not have a human father. This new request, in fact explains the reason for her earlier vow to virginity.

God respects human freedom. And Mary wishes to give herself freely and totally to God. And obediently. Mary’s question does not arise from doubt or hesitation to serve, but rather from the need to understand exactly what God is asking from her, and how she can be most perfectly obedient. Since her childhood she has been obedient to God through the message of angels, and what the angel Gabriel was now asking seemed at first to go against what she had already vowed. Once she has the explanation, she readily gives her response: “*Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word*” (Lk 1:38).

Mary’s response illustrates the fullness of human freedom, which does not consist in “doing what I want.” Hers is the attitude of humble obedience and service to God, freely consenting to His will and making her will one with His. But in order to be fully free, human consent must be “informed.”

Moreover, Mary shows that human freedom is most complete not when it is an assertion of power (“*I will do...*”), but rather when it is a submission and consent to greater power (“*Let it be done...*”). It is not Mary who accomplishes great things by her own will, but God who accomplishes great things in her, for her, through her. God works His plan, Mary as a creature cooperates with His grace, and great things result by the power of God. “*God who is mighty has done great things for me*” (Lk 1:49).

¹ Cf. Protoevangelium of St. James

² These events are celebrated in the Feast of the “Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” on November 21.