

**“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son,
and they shall call His name Emmanuel.”**

Mt 1:23

On this last Sunday before Christmas we turn our attention to the fourth of the great figures of Advent, Our Blessed Lady herself, she who has been standing quietly in the wings of this great drama and who, even when she does step into the limelight, refuses to take centre stage but yields it always to her Divine Son.

See how, far from obscuring our vision of the Saviour, her whole life is ordered to bringing Him into the world and then making Him known once He is here. Just as St Joseph would step aside from the great responsibility now demanded of him if he could – all too aware that Our Lady was ‘found to be with child by the Holy Spirit’ – so his betrothed, the humble Maiden of Nazareth, hesitates, not because she is in any way reluctant to do the will of God – far from it – but because she is fully grounded in her simplicity and is conscious of the enormity of the privilege that is to be bestowed upon her, and is in awe at the prospect of what it might involve.

The Blessed Virgin’s question in Luke’s account of the Annunciation – where she wonders how the Angel’s word can be, because, after all, God Himself knows that she has consecrated her virginity to the Almighty and He could not reject such a gift once it was given – is more a sign of her understandable confusion rather than an indicator of doubt. Our Lady does not question the message that has come to her; she only asks how it is to be fulfilled. As we heard last week of St Joseph, Our Lady never doubts the goodness of God and never doubts that all things are ordered to the glory of God.

What a model for us all! Never doubting God's Word, never reluctant to obey His will in all things: asking only how His will is to be put into practice in our own lives.

In her childhood consecration of her virginity – a feast we observe on 21st November each year – Our Blessed Lady gave herself whole and entire to Almighty God. She offered herself as a gift on an altar of sacrifice, giving to God every fibre of her being and holding nothing back. Did she offer this gift of self because she was already filled with grace? Or did God fill her with His grace because He knew in advance the nature of her generosity? In truth, all goodness has its origin in God, but Mary's co-operation with His goodness was, nonetheless, active. Her gift of self was not easier for her than ours might be: She still invested the whole of her being in that act of giving. In fact, because she was full of grace, and because she saw God specifically, and reality more generally, with a greater clarity than we possess, her act of self-giving involved a greater investment of self than any act of self-giving we might make to God. And in a similar vein, her sufferings as Our Lady of Sorrows, rooted in a supernatural knowledge of the offence our sins give to God, was likewise more intense than any sufferings of our own. No, her life was not necessarily easier because she was filled with grace.

Yet through it all, she bowed her head meekly, and pondered God's mysteries in her heart (Lk 2:19, 51), absorbing truths she did not fully understand and beauty that was beyond her experience, and co-operating with the supernatural goodness of God in a world that surrounded her, as it does us, with sin.

'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and you shall call His name Emmanuel.' When Our Blessed Lady uttered her *fiat* – her 'Let it be done unto me according to your word' – the Son of God became incarnate in her womb. Heaven pierced the very fabric of earth. The spiritual penetrated the physical. The divine entered the human. The supernatural became present to the natural. And it was the Blessed Virgin Mary's 'Yes' to

God's will that made all of this possible. She opened up to a fallen human race the possibility of redemption. It matters not one jot what might have happened had Our Lady not said yes because she *did* say yes.

Once again, this serves as a model for us all. How can any of us know what possibilities we open up for the working of God's grace if only we say 'Yes' to His will! The fear, of course, is that we will not understand what saying 'Yes' might involve. And that is the challenge of laying ourselves open to vulnerability. But those of us who have lost loved ones – and that is probably everyone here today – know that we cannot love without rendering ourselves vulnerable to pain. We have only to look at the crucifix to see that love comes at a price!

And that is what marks out our Christian celebration of Christmas compared to the secular festivities of Yuletide. The world sees a cosy picture of infancy and warmth, sprinkled with a heavy dose of tinsel. By contrast, we prepare ourselves to see the wood of the manger transformed into the wood of the Cross. Remember, the holly, with its prickly leaves symbolizes the Crown of Thorns whilst its berries of red His drops of blood.

This is what Our Blessed Lady opens herself up to. On this last Sunday of Advent we pray that we may follow in her footsteps.