

## Sermon for 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent - Jane Brough

When it comes to talents, some people seem to have an abundance. They are kind, bright, artistic, personable, sought after - as well as not having a big head! Some people strive earnestly for talents that others seem to have effortlessly. There are those who train, sweat, struggle, diet, try to say the right things, try to please, smile endlessly, and yet, for all their efforts they seem to be overlooked.

Like the rich prince in the fairy tale who goes into serious training to win the heart of the princess. He tries every charm in his book, but she has her eyes fixed elsewhere and marries a penniless woodcutter who didn't do anything to win her favour. The woodcutter was chosen because of the mysterious preference of the princess's love and the prince was left to wonder why he couldn't earn the love of the princess. After all, he had done all the right things.

Like our friend, the bewildered prince, when we see how some people are chosen we ask: "What did they do to deserve that?" We presume that they must have done something special and we get tangled up trying to scrutinise their performance for some clue and in all this we forget the freedom of the one who chose them in the first place.

In today's Gospel we celebrate the extravagant love of God who freely chose Mary to be the mother of his beloved son. God's choice of Mary made her "full of grace". If grace is God's gift, Mary was full of God's gifts. There is no point in asking what Mary did to deserve that, she didn't do anything to deserve it because it was a sheer gift. 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 Mary. When Mary is chosen to be the mother of God's son, God's choice of her is not a reward for dedicated work or an answer to Mary's prayer. Rather, God's choice of Mary is the result of God's freedom to choose Mary from among all women. When God chooses Mary, his choice makes her worthy, as his love has made her full of grace. This truth is reflected in the Magnificat, when Mary prays:

"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 mysterious preference, because he has freely chosen to look on Mary in such a way, because he has made her full of grace, all generations - as we today - call her blessed. For God graced Mary for a mission that was not for herself, her mission in the Plan of God was to give Jesus to every generation of the human family.

Some people suspect that because Mary was so talented by God, this makes her no longer really human. Certainly, Mary has a unique role to play in history, as the church teaches, she occupies a place in the church which is the highest after Christ and closest to us. Being chosen by God for such a task does not exclude Mary from the human race, God's choice of her does not free her from making her choice for God. Mary was asked to put her freedom, her whole person at the service of God's plan.

The difference between us and Mary is not that Mary was chosen while we are not, rather, it is that she fully responded to be chosen for her role while we remain hesitant and half-hearted about responding to what God asks of us. God has chosen all of us. This great truth was expressed by St Paul when he wrote "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. Like her, we are challenged to say yes. If we could see ourselves as the result of God's choice rather than a mobile mistake, we might be keener to say yes! God has chosen every single person here today, he has a role for each of us. He waits for our choice that puts our freedom at his service.

God's word to Mary in today's Gospel is of supreme value. "Rejoice, highly favoured". Perhaps we don't really believe that God favours us. Maybe we have reached the stage where we don't think we are worth anything anyway. So today let that be God's word to you, "Rejoice, highly favoured, for I have chosen you to be holy and live through life in my presence."

Yes, you! Rejoice!!