

Why did God choose Mary?

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THE Old Testament presents us with the mystery, and indeed the inscrutability, of God's choice. Why did God choose to create the universe? Such questions lead easily to others, of course, including those beloved of children: Who created God? What was God doing before he created the world? St Augustine had a perfect riposte: What was God doing before he created the universe? He was thinking up suitable punishments for those who ask silly questions like that.

The radical mystery of God's choice unfolds as the story of God's chosen people unfolds: a people called by God not because of their inherent righteousness, because they were repeatedly a stubborn and stiff-necked people, but because God's choice, the choice of his love, but a free and not a necessary love, fell upon them.

The free character of God's choice emerges in a series of contrasting figures: Cain and Abel, Abraham and Lot, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and in our reading from Genesis today, Manasseh and Ephraim. There are lots of other examples later: David and his brothers, or David and Saul. I have heard many a sermon over the years which has sought to find some rational reason for God's choice, why Abel's meat sacrifice was to be preferred to Cain's vegetarian offering for example, although today it is usual to be told that it's healthier and kinder to the overall environment not to eat too much meat, which makes the modern day apologetic a bit harder.

The Book of Job can be seen as a grand celebration of God's inscrutable and free choice, against all the rational explanations for Job's plight which his so-called 'friends' put forward. At its climax God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind:

'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me who determined its measurements? Who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?'

After the great litany of the wonders of creation, Job assures God:

'I know that thou canst do all things.'

The New Testament is the product of reflection upon and witness to a new revelation of God's potential to do all things, to the point of permitting a camel to go

through the eye of a needle, because all things are possible to Him. The freedom of God to create the universe expresses itself in a redemptive way which was both totally surprising to the first Christians, and yet made more sense of their existence than anything else could. God had the freedom to become incarnate, to need his nappy changed, to struggle with temptation, to be hungry and afraid, to be nailed to a cross. It led to a rethinking, a deepening, of the Hebrew understanding of God, which issued over time in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. It also led to a deeper understanding of creation itself, with a clearer emergence of the dogma of creation out of nothing, a direct result of reflection upon the radical nature of God's freedom in creation and redemption alike. Historically this was catalysed by debate with the twin alternatives of a Gnostic God who is not the Creator at all, or the God of Greek philosophy who is a necessary part of the cosmic process itself.

To speak of God as free is not to lapse into the mistake which Calvin could not quite avoid, to see God's inscrutable will as ultimately arbitrary, different from his will as revealed in Jesus Christ, predestining some to salvation and some to damnation. God's freedom is not based upon an arbitrary notion of freedom, but upon a proper understanding of what it is to be the perfect person, a person who is perfectly free and infinitely loving, whose freedom is an aspect of his love, and who always loves in freedom, choosing whom he will, but always with the love of all creation in mind. Abraham is chosen that in him all nations would be blessed. As St Paul puts it in Romans 4, Abraham is the father of us all, Jews and Gentiles alike.

God as Father means God as a person, with the infinite personal freedom only God can have.

Today is the Feast of St Patrick, Apostle of Ireland. He is a leading representative of what is colloquially called Celtic Christianity. Serious scholars tend to be rather dismissive of much that is claimed to be associated with Celtic Christianity, which has had a lot of faddish attention for the past thirty years. But there is something about the spiritual traditions of the Celtic fringes of the UK which is distinctive, and seems to trace its pedigree back to the anti-gnostic theology of St John's circle in Asia Minor, which St Irenaeus in turn bequeathed to us from Asia Minor's mission field in Gaul. From Gaul these traditions readily became influential in Celtic Britain.

So as Roman Christianity spread into Britain it discovered that this eastern orthodox impact had preceded it, a situation which caused practical as well as theological problems, culminating in the Synod of Whitby. The issue of a common date for Easter

remains a problem today, of course, but Bede tells us that it was regarded as quite intolerable that the King of Northumbria should adopt the Roman date for Easter while the Queen insisted on the Eastern date. The King didn't appreciate celebrating Easter, while the Queen was still observing Lent.

As I say, generalisations about Celtic Christianity are fraught with difficulty, but there does seem to be a spirit of freedom in the writings and authors who are associated with it. And that's why Celtic spirituality is so attractive to a modern culture which is passing through a crisis of freedom, lurching between totalitarianism and complete licence, or between an even greater encroachment of state control in our lives, and a corresponding insistence on individualistic human rights.

In this year when we recall, and also celebrate, Charles Darwin, we acknowledge our rootedness in the wider creation, the fact that we are taken from the dust and to dust we shall return. But we must never lose sight of what distinguishes ourselves from the rest of the animal kingdom, our human freedom. It is a freedom to make complete fools of ourselves if we are so inclined, or don't have the wisdom to avoid it. The freedom to fall, as Adam and Eve did. But human freedom is also the freedom to fashion a world, to create a universe of our own imagination, to transcend the evidence of our senses. It is the freedom to understand that the earth is best seen as orbiting the sun, rather than vice-versa, despite what our eyes tell us. Human freedom is the freedom to be a scientist or an artist alike, and preferably both together.

Freedom is basic to being human. Churchill saw that, and knew that tyrannical regimes which wished to snuff out the flame of human freedom could only be opposed to one's dying breath, however hopeless, by mere human judgment, the cause might seem.

So, finally, to Mary, the one freely chosen by God to be *theotokos*. The one who freely responds, 'Be it unto me according to thy will'.

There's a danger, I think, of regarding Mary as too pious. No doubt she was transformed by the experience of grace, and perhaps—just perhaps—one can trace God's choice of her back to her conception. I'm not sure about that, but if Jeremiah could do so for himself, perhaps we can do so for Mary, if perhaps not in a way which separates her too much from us. But she should be seen primarily as in the long line of Old Testament figures who were chosen by God just because God is the one who always does choose, but whose freedom in choosing is *genuinely* free.

Mary is favoured by God, in a unique and special way, but we also are favoured by God in our own unique and special ways, because each human being is an irreducibly individual person, taken from a particular portion of the dust of the earth. Mary is the Mother of the Church, and the Mother of all believers, a new Eve. We share her nature and as Mother of the Church she does not cease to be a child of God, as well as, in the sense of *theotokos*, the Mother of God.

Why did God choose Mary? He just did. Why did she accept her destiny? It was the most sensible, truthful and real response she could make, out of her God-given freedom. Mary shows us in a definitive way the meaning of that much loved expression from the Book of Common Prayer, 'whose service is perfect freedom'.