

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

"God chose what the world considers weak, in order to shame the powerful." 1 Cor. 1

It is appropriate on this day, which is set aside in the Church's calendar to recall the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to reflect upon the significance of her vocation; her response to God's call, and the implication in that for the life and vocation of the Church.

The words of the Annunciation - "Hail O favoured one, the Lord is with you - you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call his name Jesus" - are also addressed to the Church - to you and to me as we also are favoured one's who are called to be Christ Bearers to the world. Mary's response to God's call - "let it be to me according to your word, is our response also, as we seek to be obedient to God's call in our lives - a call which begins with our Baptism - which is intensified at our confirmation. when the Bishop repeats the words of the prophet Isaiah

"The Spirit of the Lord be upon you,
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit of counsel and of inward strength,
The Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord"

In Isaiah, these words are spoken of the coming Messiah, but they are applied in the Confirmation Service to the follower of Christ as he or she receives the Holy Spirit - the dynamic force which alone can motivate the disciple of Christ.

St. Paul reminds us, as he reminded the Christians at Corinth in those early days: God has called you - God has chosen you - he has chosen what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful.

The Virgin Mary has, in Christian tradition, been seen as a personification of the Church - this is probably why so many Churches are dedicated to her. The Gospel describes her as "full of Grace" - imbued with the Grace of God. In saying "Yes" to God, she opened herself to being vulnerable to abuse and scorn. The grace which she received was not without cost - she was destined to suffer the agony of being a witness to her Son's crucifixion. She was called by God to be the bearer of Christ - the Saviour of the world. She responded in humble obedience to the will of God - "be it unto me according to thy word". So, just as Christ was born in her, so also we pray at Christmas time that Christ may also be born in us - so that we may bear Christ to our modern world. As the carol puts it,

"O Holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray,
cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today".

What does this call to discipleship mean today for the farmer, the factory worker, the business-man, the housewife or the soldier in Northern Ireland? Does it lead to an intolerable contradiction between our religious life and the real world in which we live? Does our Sunday Worship have anything to do with our weekday lives - or are the two parts separate and distinct - the sacred and the secular? Is our Christianity a cosy religious club for a small minority - a spiritual elite? Does it mean the repudiation of

the great mass of society and a hearty contempt for the weak and the poor? If so, it is the exact opposite of the grace of Jesus Christ, who came to the publicans and sinners, the weak and the poor, the unemployed and the unemployable. He died on the cross alone, abandoned by most of his disciples. With him were crucified, not two of his followers, but two common thieves. His prayer in that hour, and his forgiveness was meant for all of them and for all their sins. The mercy and love of God are at work even in the midst of his enemies. It is the same Jesus Christ, who of his grace saves the thief who mocks him on the cross in his last hour.

If we have the nerve to answer the call to discipleship - as lay people or ordained - where will it lead us I wonder? What decisions - what partings - will it demand from us? To answer this question we shall have to turn to Him, for only He knows the journey's end. But we are assured that the way of the cross is the way of boundless mercy and grace. True discipleship brings love and joy and peace.

May God grant us joy as we strive to follow the Way, the Truth and the Life. "Come unto me all who travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light".

AMEN