

THE EMMAUS SERIES

4th Sunday of Advent, Year B

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Let what you have said be done to me

Today, our Advent liturgy takes on a new focus. In the past Sundays, the theme of the Saviour's 'coming' has made us aware of the unfolding of God's plan for creation. Luke's gospel of the Annunciation – emphasising the fact that the coming of the Saviour depended upon Mary's consent – reminds us of the mystery that is basic to our existence as persons, that we must all play our part in the realisation of God's final plan. Our life 'in Christ' is at once gift and task. All that we do, leading to eternal life, begins with the unmerited gifts of God's 'grace', but these gifts bring with them the tasks whereby we realise our true personhood, as followers of Christ.

Our first reading from 2 Samuel is chosen because it contains the prophecy that the sovereignty of the House of David will last forever. This prophecy, the angel tells Mary, will be fulfilled in the Son she is to conceive, who will be given 'the throne of his ancestor, David', and will exercise a 'reign that will never end'. This fascinating Old Testament text, however, reflects the ambiguities of the mystery of divine/human collaboration through which God's designs are realised. Though David became, in retrospect, a symbolic figure in the messianic expectations of old Israel, there was much in his life that does not bear close scrutiny. And many of the kings who were his descendents were oppressors of the people, for whom the Jerusalem temple was a symbol of their centralised political power. The prophecy of Nathan, in the tradition that has developed over the intervening centuries, subtly hints at these ambiguities. God will fulfil the messianic expectations that have come to be associated with David's name, but the prophecy distances itself from the selfish politics of the House of David - David will not build God's 'house'; he is reminded that he was only a shepherd boy when God made him great; when God builds up his house, and gives it a reign that will never end, the whole world will know that it is all God's doing.

What a contrast between this history, marked by human inadequacies, and the consent of Mary, opening the way to the glorious fulfilment of old Israel's hopes. The gospel account of Mary's encounter with God's messenger, we should note, is not a visual description – as suggested by familiar paintings. Taking the form of a dialogue, it spells out the decision in which Mary – putting aside her puzzlement and the uncertainties associated with the future into which she was being invited – gave her wholehearted consent. This consent, it is clear, is possible through God's 'grace' and favour: 'Rejoice so highly favoured', is the greeting brought by God's messenger. The narrative makes it clear that this beginning owes nothing to human standing or achievement. By human standards, Mary is an insignificant slip of a girl – fourteen or fifteen was the usual age of betrothal. She comes from Nazareth, an obscure village of about 150 souls, not even mentioned in the Old Testament. But the passing of time will bring to light how great were God's gifts, and how total was Mary's heroic response – making her the mother of the Saviour, the model of discipleship – indeed the Mother of the whole family of discipleship.

The reading from St Paul, the concluding passage of Romans, calls us back to awareness of the place of Mary's response - and our personal responses - in a total plan shaped by God's gifts, and our carrying out of the tasks these gifts have brought – a 'mystery kept secret for endless ages ... the way the eternal God wants things to be', revealed in Jesus Christ, and to be made known to the whole human family.

John Thornhill sm