

Freedom and God's Plan of Salvation

December 20, 2015

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Readings: Micah 5.1-4a;
Hebrews 10.5-10;
Luke 1.39-45**By Rev. Peter Ryan, S.J. and Janis Clarke**

During this season of Advent, God's plan of salvation has been unfolding before our very eyes in the scriptures. Today's readings bring us to the cusp of the mystery. The prophet Micah proclaims that the ruler "whose origin is from of old" is about to be born. That ruler is the Eternal Word, God himself, who takes on our flesh in the womb of the Virgin.

The reading from Hebrews offers deeper insight by affirming that the Father prepared a body for Christ, whose obedience in offering that body for our salvation consecrates us. God's plan is to enable us to find salvation and so be happy with him in his Kingdom forever.

Why This Particular Plan

Before taking a closer look at this plan, we might increase our appreciation of what God is up to by stepping back and asking a prior question. If God wants us to be happy with him in heaven forever, why doesn't he just create us already there? Why does he arrange this whole plan of salvation with all its complications and trials when he, being all powerful, could create us already enjoying heavenly fulfillment?

The answer is that while God could have created people already in heaven with him, such a heaven would be bland when compared with the marvelous Kingdom he has in mind, a Kingdom that would be impossible without the antecedent situation of our lives in this world. For he is preparing a heaven filled with a variety of saints, most of whom – those who are able to make free choices – can become the unique saints he calls them to be only by freely cooperating with his grace. No two lives are exactly the same. No two people have exactly the same gifts, relationships, opportunities, and challenges. And all are called to their own proper sanctity by using their gifts as God asks in the circumstances he provides and the adversity he allows. In heaven, these diverse members of the body of Christ complement each other wonderfully.

God obviously could not have created us already having good character. He gives us this precious time on earth as our one opportunity to shape our character for better or, God forbid, for worse. The character we shape now does not pass away when we die but will be ours forever in heaven or, if we exclude ourselves by refusing to cooperate, in hell. He wants us to be noble lovers, here and hereafter. And he knows that heaven can be peopled with such lovers only if we are first able to make noble choices for the sake of the beloved in circumstances of adversity. That is why this world has sometimes been called "the vale of soul-making."

Jesus Perfects the Human Character

Understanding why God requires us to pass through this valley of tears should deepen our appreciation of Jesus as the noble lover par excellence. The Word made flesh did not move a muscle outside of the Father's will, and for one who is fully human, that is no easy task, especially when Jesus was denied and betrayed, arrested and abandoned, mocked and spat upon, scourged and crucified.

Yet through it all, knowing that the Father's plan would enable us to enter into everlasting communion with him as members of his body, Jesus found joy in obeying perfectly. As the reading from the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, "we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." And as Hebrews says elsewhere, "For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God."

Jesus embraced the fullness of the human condition, for he was like us in all things but sin. As God, of course, Jesus is perfect; indeed, he is love itself. But the Word had to develop in his humanity as we develop. Although he always chose perfectly according to the Father's will, it was only *by* choosing that he became *humanly* noble and loving. In so doing, he perfected the *human* character that would be his in the Kingdom forever and became a model for us who are striving to shape our own characters.

Jesus embraced his personal vocation, in all its challenging particulars, to be the Savior of the world. He calls us to set aside our own plans and discern our personal vocations, which is the unique role that each of us is called to play in his salvific mission. We can learn about yielding to God's will by considering the response of Mary and Zechariah.

Two Examples – Mary and Zechariah

Mary gave herself completely to the Father's plan. Let's consider the backstory. When the angel Gabriel appears to her and tells her that she will conceive a son – the Son of the Most High – she does not doubt God's power. But she does try to discern whether the apparition and proposal are really from him. Mary understands that if this invitation is truly from God, it must fit in perfectly with the way he has already worked in her life. When she learns that she will not conceive through man but through the Holy Spirit, she immediately believes. Filled with wonder that she will bear the very Son of God, Mary speaks her *yes*.

This gift above all gifts motivates Mary to offer *yes* after *yes* through a lifetime of adversity. *Yes* to being misunderstood and judged when she was pregnant and unmarried; *yes* to a grueling trip to Bethlehem when she was great with child; *yes* to giving birth in a cave; *yes* to fleeing into Egypt; *yes* to the sword which would deeply pierce her own heart as it pierced the heart of her crucified Son. Through her *yesses*, God shaped her into the greatest of saints.

Mary's joyful faith stands in stark contrast to Zechariah's sad response. Though he is not mentioned in today's gospel, he may well have been listening to the conversation between Mary and Elizabeth. His backstory is also worth pondering. When the angel told him that Elizabeth would conceive a son, he replied, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

Zechariah's response was no effort to discern, but an expression of despair. Having hoped for a son his whole married life, he experienced profound disappointment when it became clear, as Luke tells us, that Elizabeth was barren. Of course, the couple was "righteous in the eyes of God." But Zechariah had no doubt been so hurt when the desire of his heart had not been granted earlier that he was afraid to hope that it might be fulfilled after all. He didn't want to set himself up for more disappointment.

The Lord, however, does not give up on Zechariah. The angel's words will be fulfilled, and until they are, Zechariah will be unable to speak. The punishment seems severe, but in silence we receive, as Zechariah surely did during those nine months. The punishment was in fact a gift – as it always is with God.

Imagine Zechariah's wonder when he first noticed Elizabeth's belly swell! Could it be? He must have been aching with the gratitude that he was unable to express in words. And his repentance must have been very deep indeed.

As Mary greets Elizabeth, imagine Zechariah in the background, humbly recalling his own response to the angel and filled with loving awe in the presence of the Virgin. Elizabeth, who perhaps also struggled to believe after many years of barrenness, gives voice to that awe and proclaims, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

Cooperating with God's Grace

Mary got it right the first time, and Zechariah finally gets it right, too. Filled with pride and joy at the birth of his child, he confirms that his son's name is John. At that moment, the Lord loosens Zechariah's tongue, and this time he speaks not words of doubt but a song of gratitude from the Holy Spirit which the Church repeats every morning: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel . . ."

Zechariah is at last cooperating with God's grace, and in so doing is becoming the unique saint he was born to be. His earlier words of doubt sprang from a fearful heart and contradict God's loving word to him. Now, like Mary's, his words arise from a trusting heart and are the very words of God.

Like Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary, we too are called to cooperate with the Father's plan of salvation in Jesus and to shape ourselves, with his grace, into the saints that he called us into being to become. Indeed, as Luke suggests in recounting how the unborn John the Baptist leapt for joy in the presence of his Savior, we are called even from our mother's womb to bear witness to Jesus and his coming Kingdom. More than ever, the weary world needs that witness. How will we respond?

About the Authors

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FOR FURTHER READING

Bishop Robert Barron, "How Do We Cooperate with God's Plan?" available at:

<http://www.wordonfire.org/resources/video/how-do-we-cooperate-with-gods-plan-askfrbarron/181/>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§946-962, available at:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a9p5.htm

John Paul II, Redemptor hominis, available at:

<http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals>

Rev. William G. Most, "Church Teaching on Mary's Cooperation in the Redemption of Mankind," available at:

<https://www.ewtn.com/faith/teachings/marya3a.htm>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Why does God arrange this whole plan of salvation with all its complications and trials when he could create us already enjoying heavenly fulfillment?***
- ***Because he is preparing a heaven filled with a variety of saints, most of whom can become the unique saints he calls them to be only by freely cooperating with his grace.***
- ***The character we shape now does not pass away when we die but will be ours forever in heaven or, if we exclude ourselves by refusing to cooperate, in hell.***
- ***Jesus' perfect obedience is no easy task, especially when he was denied and betrayed, arrested and abandoned, mocked and spat upon, scourged and crucified.***
- ***By choosing obedience Jesus perfected the human character and became a model for us who are striving to shape our own characters.***