

**The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer**  
**The Fourth Sunday of Advent, year 'C'**  
**December 20, 2009**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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There are many feast days in our liturgical calendar. The most important of these feasts are, of course, those of our Lord – Christmas, Easter and so forth. But the *majority* of the feasts are dedicated to the saints whom the Church in its wisdom lifts up before us as those who, in their lives, have been singular witnesses for Christ and his gospel. The saints are, in short, examples and inspirations for us. And Mary is our greatest example and inspiration. Look for yourselves in the front of the *Book of Alternative Services* and you will see six holy days devoted to her: 2 February, the Presentation of the Lord (also called The Purification of St. Mary the Virgin); 25 March, the Annunciation; 31 May, the Visit of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Elizabeth; 15 August, St. Mary the Virgin; 8 September, the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary; and 8 December, the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

For those who would identify with other Christian traditions which are rooted more firmly in the teaching of the Reformation, Mary remains a kind of peripheral figure who enters the consciousness twice a year: Christmas and Easter. The Protestant reformers had a great distaste for the veneration of saints – and no saint was more venerated in Christianity than the Virgin Mary. And these reformers thought they had Scripture on their side: references to Mary in the New Testament are few. But the reformers were also quite an unimaginative lot who could not see (or didn't acknowledge) that even though Mary's appearances may be scanty, they are significant as showing her intimate, but subordinate and unobtrusive, cooperation in the redemptive work of her Son. Eric Mascall once wrote:

'It is noteworthy that in the account of the annunciation Mary's free and willing consent, expressed in the sentence 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word,' is the climax of the narrative. In her virginal conception and motherhood of the divine Word and the few but important recorded events of his childhood, in her presence at the wedding at Cana, in her standing by the cross and in her union in prayer with the apostles between the ascension and Pentecost, Christian devotion has found much material for meditation and amplification.'

For us this meditation and amplification comes in the aforementioned feast days, each of which presents us with a certain angle, as it were, by which we can examine the life and example of Mary. She is an example of humility, or patience, or even purity. In the light of this morning's gospel we might consider her obedience to the will of God. She submits to the will of God and offers herself to fulfil a purpose that is not her own. There are, of course, many among our contemporaries who see in Mary's resignation to a supposedly dominant male will the prototype of the

subjugation of all women. Feminist scholars deride the church's exaltation of Mary, for they believe that it exalts those qualities of quiet submission and obedience that they see as negative and destructive.

No doubt it is perverse to use Mary as some kind exemplar of the barefoot-and-pregnant image of womanhood. Mary's submission to the will of God is no more gender-specific than is our Lord's submission, Christ's in the Garden, when he says, "Not my will, but yours, be done." In both we see the paradox of the transformative power of submission.

In a statement called *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (called ARCIC) wrote:

'The scriptural witness summons all believers in every generation to call Mary 'blessed'; this Jewish woman of humble status, this daughter of Israel living in hope of justice for the poor, whom God has graced and chosen to become the virgin mother of his Son through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. We are to bless her as the 'handmaid of the Lord' who gave her unqualified assent to the fulfilment of God's saving plan, as the mother who pondered all things in her heart, as the refugee seeking asylum in a foreign land, as the mother pierced by the innocent suffering of her own child, and as the woman to whom Jesus entrusted his friends. We are at one with her and the apostles, as they pray for the outpouring of the Spirit upon the nascent Church, the eschatological family of Christ. And we may even glimpse in her the final destiny of God's people to share in her son's victory over the powers of evil and death.'

But we don't celebrate only (or even) Mary's example – her willingness, her lowliness, her readiness – we celebrate the God who makes all things possible. In Mary we don't see simply the pattern for our own lives, a sort of religious cautionary tale enjoining us to be always ready. We see the sovereignty of God and the love of God which rules all times and all places, and which encompasses all and which renews and enables all.

We need to get beyond our image of Mary as an object of superstition and realize that she who first received the grace of God became the means whereby the grace of God was made flesh in the world. She is for us the means of the incarnation who belongs not alone to medieval adoration nor solely to the Roman and Orthodox churches. In her call from God and in her response to that call, she is the mother not only of Jesus but also of our vocation, and of our calling as well. In her we see a truly universal experience of the renewing power of grace. So today our prayer is that we, unworthy and unlikely though we may be, should be willing, like Mary, to be open to the call of God, to be ready to say yes, and in so doing find that we are gifted with her to be the bearers of Christ in our world, and that in us as in her, God's will is made manifest.