

Homily 4th Sunday of Advent – Year B 24th December 2017

Picture this for a moment: You are the proud mother/father of a daughter who has just announced her engagement to a local builder a good young man from a well-respected family. You are so happy you can hardly contain yourself; you thank God for the blessings He has bestowed on your family. Then one evening your daughter comes to the family table and announces: Mum, Dad I'm pregnant. The word 'pregnant' shatters your world like a blow from a sledgehammer. Your immediate thought is well, we will have to bring the wedding forward. Then just as you begin to recover your world is dealt another sickening blow with the words: "Joseph is not the father!" These last words release a cascade of emotions, shame, anger, rage and utter disappear. Your daughter has destroyed her life brought unspeakable shame on the family. In first century Palestine there are social safety-nets; unmarried mums are shunned by their family and their community. They are condemned to a life of absolute poverty living on the fringe they either starved or turned to prostitution or both. Their lives are full of

hopelessness and despair. 'Why' flashes through your mind like summer lightning. Why did you do this? Why were you so stupid? Why did this happen? Why? Why?

When we read Luke's account of the Annunciation and Mary's response, Mary's 'yes' to God, it's easy for us to turn it into a Disney fairy tale. It's too easy for us to ignore the immediate social impact of Mary's yes. I can easily imagine the whole story as a happy ever after fairy tale. Where once everybody realised what was going on everything would be rosy. But I asked myself what would my reaction be if I was Mary's Dad what would I say? How would I react? I clearly remember being at a large family gathering when one of my relatives announced that their daughter, who was very close to my father, was pregnant. Poor Dad was horrified and asked the news to be repeated several times before he was prepared to believe it. Would Mary be treated any differently in our society? Think of Mary's story, she is an unmarried pregnant woman, who says she conceived by the Holy Spirit. She goes to live with her relative Elizabeth for three months. At some point her partner consents to marry her based on a dream. She gives birth and immediately becomes

a refugee. What would the media make of her story, Mary would be ridiculed. If you want some idea of how unmarried mums have been treated by our Church and our society take a look at the 2013 movie 'Philomena'. The movie tells the true story of Philomena Lee's 50-year search for her forcibly adopted son. If you need to be reminded about our treatment of refugees well I'm sorry you must not watch the evening news, listen to the radio or read a newspaper. How would I, we treat Mary the Mother of Our Saviour? I fail to see how we would treat her any different from the countless pregnant women we have marginalised and the countless refugees we have victimised, locked up or turned away.

Mary truly understood the implications of saying yes to God she truly understood that her life would not be a fairy tale. She recognised that her life and in fact humanity would never be the same again. Mary's situation was not an accident of history; she was not in the right place at the right time. No, of all the women that have or will inhabit the earth Mary was selected by God to be the Mother of the Christ, the long awaited Messiah. It's as if God surveyed all humanity and selected Mary and Joseph to be the key players in

His redemptive plan for humanity. Mary represents the peak of human perfection; Mary is what we can be. When confronted with choice Mary did not ask: Why me? Why did this happen? No Mary's response was: What does this mean. Mary encapsulates that old saying: "It's not what happens to you that's important but how you respond to it."

For me Mary's answer to: What does this mean? Is beautifully expressed in the opening paragraph of Mary's conversation with Elizabeth in Luke's Gospel, the Magnificate, that beautiful evening prayer of the Church:

*I acclaim the greatness of the Lord,
I delight in God my Saviour
who regraded my humble state.
Truly from this day on
all ages will call me blest.*

Mary realised the reality of the interment relationship God wants with all of us. She realised that in saying yes to God she magnified God's presence within His creation. Mary rejoiced in God's presence in her life. Undoubtedly Mary's place in God's redemptive plan was unique. Her womb contained the One that

Creation could not contain. But if we like Mary say yes to God. Not matter what the implications. And there will be implications, I don't know about you but I'm getting tired of hearing how vengeance can be extracted on our Church in the wake of the Royal Commission's findings. Abuse and cover-ups perpetrated within our Church must be acknowledged, redressed and never allowed to happen again. But like all humanity we are more than our sins because like Mary when we say yes to God we magnify God's presence within His creation. A presence all of creation longs for a presence society will be incomplete without.

This Christmas as I hand out presents, eat and drink my "Christmas Wine" which I have picked out and cellared for the last eight years, I will try to remember that the true celebration of Christmas is the celebration of the Christ in each and every one of us. If I can do that if we all can do that then truly from this day on all ages will call us blest.

May, the grace and joy of the Christ Child be with you, your family and friends this Christmas Season. Have a merry Christmas and enjoy your Christmas wine.