

*So you are no longer a slave, but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. Galatians 4 v 7*

There are two widespread mistakes about the Christian faith which try to frustrate what God desires. The first is the deep seated notion that Christians believe that we human beings are born with a fatal design fault, which accounts for our being so prone to frailty and wrongdoing. People sometimes call that 'original sin', which is a proper term and a valuable one, but which designates something different. But whatever you call it, the alleged design fault means that like a motor car I once owned, and was glad to see the back of, has already got you down as a failed enterprise; you are radically unsatisfactory. So God can't think much of you, does not really wish you well, and wishes you had been made different from what you are. You are a bother and a disappointment to Him. And as the problem is a design flaw, you can't do anything about it, and your efforts are pathetic. We know where this discouraging idea comes from, because we see in life how losers get treated. We saw it in the playground as children, and teachers, employers and others are likely to have driven it home. Philip Larkin, who died this week, knew just what it's like to live with bad news about yourself and made remarkable poetry out of describing our inadequacies.

The other mistake is that Christianity teaches that we are all basically wonderful. God simply loves you, delights in everything you are and do. The world may be a difficult place, and other people may repeatedly fail to understand how lovely you are. But God knows the truth about you and is waiting to gather you to a big pillowy hotel run by Him, from whatever hell hole you might find yourself in. The great thing is to think positively and look forward, because it's all going to be all right. We know where this attractive idea comes from, too, because we may well have found how indulgent people can be, and how patient, or besotted, as they overlook the mistakes and even crimes we commit against them. To think that God is as undemanding and sentimental as they are is wonderfully comforting though tending to nausea.

This weekend we celebrate Mary, the Blessed Virgin. She was, whatever is implied by some of the stories of her own birth, a thoroughly human being. God chose her to be the means of achieving the union of heaven and earth, which is the life of the Lord Jesus to whom she gave birth. We should note that God didn't require a partnership with a part of her body but with all that Mary was: her womanliness, her

Jewishness, her family, her particular character, her social background and even the shape of her nose (for Mary may not after all have been as pretty as Raphael imagined, and it makes not a penny worth of difference). In other words, Mary no more than you and I, did not suffer from an incapacitating design fault. But she had, like us, possibilities God wanted to relate to and co-operate with.

And when called to bear this special child, she rose to it. She might not have done. The words of the Benedictus and the Magnificat indicate that Mary and her family were steeped in the expectation of a coming Messiah. This dazzling but disconcerting child is not likely to have been easy to rear, and the later fragmentary glimpses we have of her relations with this eldest of her sons show that what she entered on was a great suffering to her, up to the agony of seeing him hanged as a notorious rebel and misleader of the people.

But her determined faith had been formed through the history of pious Israel and its heroic men and women. They taught her to let God do what God would do. That God thought enough of her to make her a partner in the irrevocable enterprise of joining himself to the world was enough for her. It was never, it seems, because she thought she was herself wonderful. What she treasured in her heart was all about this astonishing son she had born, not about herself. But we can acclaim her, with all generations call her blessed. For when we see the familiar pictures of Mary gazing at her child we are imagining what it was like as the first human being gazed at the coming together of heaven and earth. She was the first of us, who are in our time also the loving disciples of the Christ.

Anglicans are less likely to treasure the stories which long been told about Mary's own death and its aftermath. But the story of Mary going bodily into the heavenly realm, however we may choose to make of it, expresses a truth which we can embrace readily. It is our belief that when we offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice, a gift gladly made to God to achieve the Father's desire, God spurns nothing of it. Design fault? No, God in Christ sees in his wobbly disciples rather hope and possibility! We bring to God our bits of the world we have traversed, our time, our place, our valleys of the shadow and our mountain top ecstasies, our shames and errors and our insights and happinesses. And He takes all we are, and enlists our co-operation to sift out every grain of what we can do to be worthy of Him. Only let us like Mary hold nothing back, offer no resistance! "Be it unto me according to Your word!" God's wisdom and discernment enable us to rise,

hand in hand with Mary's son, so that we own powers God has given and continues to give: for "He that is mighty magnifies us". We are not passively cosseted by God who respects us too much for that. Rather, we joyfully and actively embrace and share the heaven of living with the one who is most holy. For there we are participants in the divinity of the son of Mary in the company of Mary herself and all who have so far been transfigured into heavenly life.