

Alliance or Obedience

Imagine that you are a general commanding an army in a war in which the fate of the entire world depended upon. You hear loud bombs exploding over your head, gunshots flying through the air and your men are being overwhelmed. So then you send a message to your commander requesting back up or else you and moments later you see a package being dropped off at your base. You earnestly open it up hoping for a large bomb or some secret weapon, but instead there is a crying baby with a note that reads: here is a baby born of a virgin...he won't be ready for another 30 years...and even after that he will die in 3 years.

Maybe now we can put ourselves in the shoes of King Ahaz of Judah who was engaged in a war that would determine the fate of Judah, and God's solution to his problem was to send a child born of a virgin? Yet God's ways are not our ways and our readings today present the two ways in which we can respond to the mystery of God's plan in our life: an alliance with sin or the obedience of faith.

Alliance with sin

Our first reading always confused me because King Ahaz seemed like a devout man not wanting to test the Lord by asking for signs. But if we read the passage today in context, we see in the previous verses that God was asking King Ahaz to trust that the war he was about to face would pass and that Judah would survive. God was even willing to give King Ahaz a miraculous sign to prove God's faithfulness. But King Ahaz refused and even decided to make an alliance with the Assyrians to ensure his safety. He did not trust.

Sometimes when we are faced with seemingly insurmountable temptations in our life, we can make a subtle shift in our heart where we make an alliance with sin rather than with God. Like King Ahaz, we can be tempted to doubt, to not believe that God has a plan for our good, that he desires our ultimate happiness and that he has the power to carry out that plan if we allow him. But instead of listening to his prophet in our hearts, we can choose to sin i.e., make an alliance with sin, believing that this ally will give us the happiness we are seeking.

Listen to what the Catechism writes about the first sin of our parents:

Man tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command...All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and a lack of trust in his goodness. CCC 397.

This is a decision we all face because we still experience concupiscence, and distrust is at the heart of every sin.

Obedience of faith

Yet Mary shows us today that there is another possibility, another way of responding to God that gives life to us and in her case life to the whole world. Sometimes we do not see the full significance of Mary's response in faith to the angel because we see faith more like an act of the intellect or mind, an acknowledgement. But we do not say in the creed, 'I acknowledge God the Father almighty, I acknowledge Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord'...But in fact we say, I believe in God the Father, I believe in Jesus Christ. Mary's response by faith was one of the head and the heart, it was the acknowledgement of God's mysterious plan but also a submission to it. Mary's faith was not just an intellectual exercise because she knew the difficulties that would arise from bearing this child. How was she going to explain this slowly developing baby in her womb to her husband? What would other people think? Yet Mary trusted with the obedience of faith which was a response in love to God's plan.

So Lord we pray that as we receive you today, we submit our heads and our hearts to you to break our alliance with sin by the blood of your cross and overflow our hearts with an abundance of faith. Even though we do not completely understand what your plan is for us at times, we trust and we "know that in everything God works for good with those who love him" (Rm 8:28). As we prepare to celebrate your first coming, may we be ready for your second coming as you have said: When the son of man comes will he find faith on the earth? (Lk 18:8)