

An icon of human freedom

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Am I not free?
1 Corinthians 9: 1

God persuades, he does not compel; for violence is foreign to him.
Epistle to Diognetus vii, 4.

What shall we offer?

In an Orthodox hymn used at Vespers on Christmas Eve, the Virgin Mary is seen as the highest and fullest offering that our humanity can make to the Creator:

*What shall we offer you, O Christ,
Who for our sakes have appeared on earth as human?
Every creature made by you offers you thanks:
The angels offer you a hymn,
The heavens a star,
The Magi gifts,
The shepherds their wonder,
The earth its cave,
The wilderness the manger;
And we offer you a Virgin Mother.*

As our supreme human offering, the Mother of God is a model – next to Christ himself, and through God's grace – of what it means to be a person. She is the mirror in which we see reflected our own true human face. And what she expresses, as our pattern and example, is above all *human freedom*. 'Am I not free?' asks the apostle; and Mary, most notably at the moment of the Annunciation, shows us precisely what this liberty implies.

Freedom, the capacity to make moral decisions consciously, with a sense of full responsibility before God, is what most of all distinguishes the human from the other animals. In the words of Søren Kierkegaard, 'The most tremendous thing granted to human persons is choice, freedom.'¹ Without liberty of choice there is no authentic personhood. When God says to Israel, 'I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; *therefore choose..*' (Deut. 30: 19), he offers us a gift that is, difficult to employ aright, often bitter and painful, even tragic, yet without which we are not genuinely human. It is freedom of choice, more than anything else, that constitutes the image of God within us. As God is free, so the human person in God's image is free.

¹ *Journals*, tr. A. Dru (Oxford 1938), § 1051.

We are, so St Athanasius affirms², creators after the image and likeness of God the Creator – 'sub-creators', to use the phrase of J. R. R. Tolkien – and if we renounce that creative freedom we deny our own humanity. As St Paul insists (1 Cor. 3: 9), we are *synergoi*, 'fellow-workers together with God', 'co-operators with God' (this is perhaps the best translation of the Greek); and it is above all the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Nazareth that indicates what such 'co-operation with God' involves.

Humans, we have said, are free as God is free. This has of course to be qualified. Divine freedom is unconditioned, whereas our human freedom in a sinful and fallen world is restricted in all too many ways. But, though restricted, it is never totally abolished; it remains in some way irreducible and inalienable. The Russian Orthodox writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn illustrates this vividly in his novel *The First Circle*, when he describes the conversation between the prisoner Bobynin and Abakumov, Stalin's Minister of State Security:³

[Bobynin] strode in, sat down without a word in one of the comfortable armchairs near the Minister's desk and elaborately blew his nose on the off-white handkerchief that he had washed himself during his last bath...

Abakumov has reason to be polite to Bobynin, whose assistance he needs for an engineering project, and so he enquires in a mild tone:

'Why did you sit down without permission?'

Bobynin, with barely a glance at the Minister and still cleaning his nose with his handkerchief, said airily:

'Well, you see, there's an old Chinese proverb: never walk if you can stand still, never stand if you can sit, but lying down is best of all.'

'Have you any idea who I might be?'

Leaning comfortably on the arms of his chair Bobynin now inspected Abakumov and ventured idly:

'Well, you look a bit like Field-Marshal Goering to me.'

Abakumov begins to grow irritated.

'What do you mean? Don't you see any difference between us?'

'Between you and him? Or between you and me?' Bobynin's voice rang like metal on metal. 'I can see the difference between you and me: you need me, but I don't need you...'

'Listen', said Abakumov, 'Don't go too far just because I choose to be polite to you. ...'

² *On the decrees of Nicaea* xi, 1-2.

³ Chapter 17.

'If you were rude to me I wouldn't talk to you at all. You can shout at your colonels and generals as much as you like because they've got plenty to lose.'

'We can deal with your sort too if we have to.'

'No, you can't.' Bobynin's piercing eyes flashed with hatred. 'I've got nothing, see? Nothing! You can't touch my wife and child – they were killed by a bomb. My parents are dead. I own nothing in the world except a handkerchief ... You took my freedom away a long time ago and you can't give it back to me because you haven't got it yourself. I'm forty-two years old. You gave me twenty-five years. I've done hard labour, I know what it is to have a number instead of a name, to be handcuffed, to be guarded by dogs, to work in a punitive brigade – what more can you do to me? '

And then Bobynin continues:

'You can tell old You-know-who-up-there that you only have power over people so long as you don't take *everything* away from them. But when you've robbed a man of *everything* he's no longer in your power – he's free again.'

Despite all the degradation that Stalin's totalitarian regime has inflicted on Bobynin, there still remains within him what Solzhenitsyn describes elsewhere as 'the innermost nucleus,' 'something very, very indestructible, something very, very high;' and that indestructible nucleus is his inner freedom, which in a paradoxical way has been enhanced rather than diminished by the loss of his outward freedom.

Let us explore together the nature of this freedom, essential to our human personhood, which the Blessed Virgin Mary displayed to a pre-eminent degree at the Annunciation.

Response in freedom

In the view of Karl Barth, it is a fundamental error to imagine that at the Annunciation Mary is making a decision on which the salvation of the world depends. To see in Mary, so Barth argues in his *Church Dogmatics*, 'the human creature co-operating servant-like in its own redemption on the basis of prevenient grace' is a heresy to which No 'must be uttered inexorably'. We are to understand her role at the Annunciation 'only in the form of non-willing, non-achieving, non-creative, non-sovereign man, only in the form of man who can merely receive, merely be ready, merely let something be done to and with himself'⁴ (in fairness to Barth, we should add that this is not in fact his only word on the subject; elsewhere he has more positive things to say about Mary).

The approach of the Christian East is altogether different. In the words of the fourteenth-century Byzantine lay theologian, St Nicolas Cabasilas.

⁴ Vol. i, part 2 (Edinburgh 1956), pp. 143,191.

*The Incarnation of the Word was not only the work of Father, Son and Spirit – the first consenting, the second descending, the third overshadowing – but it was also the work of the will and the faith of the Virgin. Without the three divine persons this design could not have been set in motion; but likewise the plan could not have been carried into effect without the consent and faith of the all-pure Virgin. Only after teaching and persuading her does God make her his Mother and receive from her the flesh that she consciously wills to offer him. Just as he was conceived by his own free choice, so in the same way she became his Mother voluntarily and with her free consent.*⁵

Cabasilas is no Pelagian, for he affirms the priority of divine grace: 'Without the three divine persons this design – could not have been set in motion.' But equally he perceives the all-important contribution made at the Incarnation by the created human freedom of the Virgin. 'God persuades, he does not compel' : the statement in the *Epistle to Diognetus* applies exactly to the event of the Annunciation. God knocks at the door, but does not break it down: Mary is chosen, but she herself also makes an act of choice. She is not merely receptive, not merely 'non-willing, non-achieving, non-creative', but she responds with dynamic liberty. As St Irenaeus expresses it, 'Mary co-operates with the economy'⁶ she is, in St Paul's words, a *synergos*, a fellow-worker with God – not just a pliant tool but an active participant in the mystery. What we see in her is not passivity but engagement, not subordination but partnership, not submission but mutuality of relationship.

All this is summed up in Mary's reply to the angel: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (Luke 1: 38). This reply was not a foregone conclusion; she could have refused. Violence is foreign to the divine nature, and so God did not become human without first seeking the willing agreement of the one whom he wished to be his mother. As Pope Paul insists, in his notable – and somewhat neglected – doctrinal statement *Marialis Cultus*,⁷ Mary is 'taken into dialogue with God', and she 'gives her active and responsible consent'; we are to see in her, not just a 'timidly submissive woman', but one who makes 'a courageous choice'.⁸ She is a decision maker. It is a striking fact – on which we can never reflect too much – that, whereas the creation of the world was brought about solely by the exercise of the divine will, the re-creation of the world was set in motion through the co-operation of a young village woman engaged to a carpenter.

Sharing, silence, offering, suffering

If the Mother of God at the moment of the Annunciation is a true icon of human freedom, of authentic liberty and liberation, then her actions and reactions in the events that follow shortly afterwards in St Luke's Gospel illustrate four basic consequences of what it means to be free. Freedom involves sharing, silence, offering and suffering.

⁵ *Homily on the Annunciation 4-5: Patrologia Orientalis 19, 488.*

⁶ *Against the Heresies 3.21.7: PG 7, 953B.*

⁷ 2nd February 1974.

⁸ §37.

Freedom involves *sharing*. Mary's first action after the Annunciation is to share the good news with someone else: she goes with haste to the hill country, to the house of Zechariah, and greets her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39-40). Here is an essential element in freedom: *you cannot be free alone*. Freedom is not solitary but social. It implies relationship, a 'thou' as well as an 'I'. The one who is egocentric, who repudiates all responsibility towards others, possesses no more than a seeming and spurious freedom, but is in reality pitifully unfree. It is true that I cannot be free unless I have a sense of my own distinctive individuality; but equally I cannot be free if I am aware solely of my own individuality and of nothing else. It is also true that I cannot be free unless I have learnt to be alone with myself; freedom involves loneliness. But I cannot be authentically free if I am always and exclusively alone. We may apply to the free person the paradox that Evagrius of Pontus affirms of the hermit: 'separated from all and united with all.'⁹ Liberation properly understood, is not defiant isolation or aggressive self-assertion, but partnership and solidarity. To be free is to share our personhood with others, to see with their eyes, to feel with their feelings: 'If one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with it' (1 Cor. 12: 26). I am only free if I become a *prosopon* – to use the Greek word for 'person', which means literally 'face' – if I turn towards others, looking into their eyes and allowing them to look into mine. To turn away, to refuse to share, is to forfeit liberty.

Here the Christian doctrine of God is immediately relevant to our understanding of freedom. As Christians we believe in a God who is not only one but one in three. The divine image within us is specifically the image of God *the Trinity*. God our creator and archetype is not just one person, self-sufficient, loving himself alone, but he is a *koinonia* or communion of three persons, dwelling in each other through an unceasing movement of mutual love. From this it follows that the divine image within us, which is the uncreated source of our freedom, is a relational image, realized through fellowship and *perichoresis*. To say, 'I am free, because I am formed in God's image', is equivalent to saying: 'I need you in order to be myself'. There is no true person except where there are at least two persons in reciprocal relationship; and there is no true freedom except where there are at least two persons who share their freedom together.

Here, then, is a first thing that Mary teaches us about freedom. It signifies relationship, openness to others, vulnerability. Without the risk and adventure of shared love, none of us can be free.

If freedom involves sharing, then it also involves *silence*, listening. 'Let it be with me according to your word' Mary answers at the Annunciation; her attitude is one of listening to the word of God. Indeed, had she not first listened to God's word and through listening received it into her heart, she would never have conceived and borne the Word physically in her womb. St Luke insists more than once upon this special characteristic of the Mother of God as the one who listens. After the visit of the shepherds to the new-born Christ, he states: 'Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2: 19). After the story of Jesus in the temple at twelve years old, the evangelist ends with a similar comment: 'His Mother treasured all these things in her heart' (Luke 2: 51). The need to listen is emphasized equally in Mary's injunction to the servants at the wedding feast of Cana, 'Do whatever

⁹ On prayer, § 124.

he tells you' (John 2: 5) – her last recorded words in the Gospels, her spiritual legacy to the Church: 'Listen, accept, respond.' Later in St Luke's Gospel – when the woman in the crowd blesses Christ's Mother, and he replies, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it' (Luke 10: 27-28) – so far from implying any disrespect to the one who bore him, Jesus seeks rather to indicate where her true glory is to be found. She is to be held in honour, not simply because of the physical fact of her motherhood, but because inwardly with all her will and with the full integrity of her personal freedom she listened to God's word and obeyed it.

Such, therefore, is a second way in which the Mother of God acts as an icon of human freedom. For St Gregory Palamas and for the Orthodox mystical tradition she is a 'hesychast', one who waits upon the Holy Spirit with the silence of the heart. Inner silence of this kind is not simply negative – not a mere absence of sounds or pause between words – but it is positive and alive, one of the deep sources of our being, part of the basic structure of our human personhood. Without silence we are not genuinely human, and without silence we are not genuinely free. Constant chatter enslaves, while the ability to listen is an essential part of freedom. The Mother of God is free because she listens. Unless we are capable of listening to others – unless in some measure we possess, as she did, the dimension of creative inner silence – we shall lack real liberty. Only the one who knows how to be silent, how to listen, is able to take decisions with an authentic freedom of choice.

A third aspect of Mary's freedom is evident in what she and Joseph did forty days after the birth of Jesus: they brought the child into the temple at Jerusalem and offered him to the Lord (Luke 2: 22). Just as there is no true freedom without sharing and silence, so freedom involves also a continuing act of *offering*, of sacrifice. This is emphasised in the quotation from Kierkegaard with which we began. After stating 'The most tremendous thing granted to humans is choice, freedom,' he continues: 'And if you want to save your freedom and keep it, there is only one way: in the very same second to give it back to God, and yourself with it.' In the words of C.S.Lewis, 'Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours.'¹⁰ Our Lord said exactly the same: 'Whoever wants to save his life must lose it' (Matt. 16: 25).

Sacrificial offering of this kind is inevitably costly; and this brings us to a fourth aspect of freedom. There is no true freedom that does not involve *suffering*. As Symeon the Elder warned the Holy Virgin when she presented her child in the temple, 'A sword will pierce through your own soul also' (Luke 2: 35). Mary learnt the full meaning of this when she stood at the foot of the Cross. Freedom means *kenosis*, cross-bearing, the laying down of one's own life for the sake of others. Mary's act of voluntary choice at the Annunciation brings her grief as well as Joy. Among modern thinkers, it is more – particularly the Russian Nicolas Berdyaev – the 'captive of freedom', as his critics called him, a *sobriquet* that gave him particular satisfaction – who has discerned with sharp clarity the costliness of freedom. 'I always knew', he states in his autobiography *Dream and Reality*, 'that freedom gives birth to suffering, while the refusal to be free diminishes suffering. Freedom

¹⁰ *Mere Christianity* (Fount/HarperCollins, 1977), p 189.

is not easy, as its enemies and slanderers allege: freedom is hard; it is a heavy burden. People... often renounce freedom to ease their lot.'¹¹

The arduous, sacrificial character of freedom is evident equally in Dostoevsky's parable 'The Tale of the Grand Inquisitor' in *The Brothers Karamazov*, The Inquisitor reproaches Christ for making humankind free, and thereby imposing on them a pain too sharp for them to endure. Out of pity for human anguish, so the Inquisitor claims, he and his fellows have removed this cruel gift of freedom: 'We have corrected your work', he says to Christ. He is right: freedom is indeed a heavy burden. Yet without freedom there can be no true personhood and no mutual love. If we refuse to exercise the gift of freedom that God offers us, we make ourselves subhuman; and if we deny others their freedom, we dehumanize them.

Such are some of the ways in which the Mother of God, our mirror and paradigm, serves as an icon of human freedom. 'Am I not free?' Yes, indeed; each of us is created free. Yet freedom is not only a gift but equally a challenge and a task, as the example of the Mother of God indicates. Freedom does not simply have to be accepted, but it needs to be discovered, learnt, used, defended – and finally to be offered up in costly self-sacrifice. Only in the act of offering back our freedom to God – through sharing, silence and suffering – can we become free persons in the image of the Trinity, after the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

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¹¹ p. 47.