

Lk 1:26-38 Hidden Christmas

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What does it mean to be the favourite?

In a home it might mean one child gets special treats that the other children don't get.

You might think no parent would be stupid enough to stoke resentment by doing that.

But you'd be surprised.

In the workplace,

it often means that someone gets the good jobs from the boss.

There's some overtime that pays time and a half, who is going to get to do the coveted shift?

But what does it mean to be God's favourite?

Now many people would presume that it would mean life going smoothly.

Your relationships work out.

You get good health.

You have plenty of money.

You can do the things you want to do.

A bit of travel - that would be nice.

Nice food.

And when it finally comes time to die after a long life,

you die peacefully in your sleep

and you never know anything about it.

That would be most people's idea of an ideal life.

Well I wonder who God's favourite is actually?

One way you could try to find out,

would be to look for the person with life you think of as favoured,

and decided that person must be God's favourite,

because look at all the goodies that God has given them.

But that would be to make a mistake.

You can't read backwards from people's good fortune to God's favour.

And that's a hidden meaning of Christmas.

We've been looking at hidden meanings of Christmas

for the last few weeks.

Here's a hidden meaning of Christmas.

God's favourite is not the one who has been most fortunate.

God's favourite is the one who he incorporates into his plans.

And the one who he incorporates into his plans,
is the one who surrenders themselves to his will.

So if you want to be God's favourite at Christmas,
you surrender yourself to God's will.

So you know the story.

There's Mary.

She's not a young woman by our way of looking at things.

She's a teenage girl.

Maybe 15 or 16 years old.

And an angel appears to her.

And he says, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured!

The Lord is with you."

Well what does it mean for Mary to be highly favoured?

Well it is highly favoured by God.

That's why the angel says, "The Lord is with you."

Who is highly favouring Mary?

God is.

But she is certainly not going to get an easy life out of it.

The news that she's being brought,

that she will conceive through the Holy Spirit,

well that's going to have the folks asking lots of questions.

And they aren't going to believe her when she tells them the answer.

But that's just the start of her problems.

The wise men are going to tip King Herod off

that a new king has been born.

Herod doesn't take kindly to the competition.

And Mary is forced into fleeing to Egypt.

The fact that God told her family to relocate

doesn't make it any more pleasant

that the king and his soldiers are wanting to kill her.

OK, you know that following God's plan things are going to work out.

But that doesn't make sleeping on the hard ground any less hard.
It doesn't make missing your friends and wider family any less painful.
And then as her son grows and begins his ministry,
she has to deal with the hostility of the religious establishment.
And she's doing that alone, no husband at her side.
It seems clear that Joseph had died prior to Jesus' public ministry.
The religious heavies really hated Jesus.
That can't have made it easy to be his mum.
And then you have to watch them crucify him.
They say it one of the hardest things for a mother to lose her child.
Imagine watching your child get executed.
Because Mary was there at the foot of the cross.
You can read about it in John's gospel.
All that is to say,
if Mary was God's favourite,
then she didn't get an easy life out of it.
There were troubles and difficulties
from the time the angel came to give her the message
she was to have a baby.

So what does it actually mean to say that Mary was highly favoured?
If she doesn't get any benefit from it,
how is she highly favoured?

Well the angel explains things to Mary.
"Do not be afraid Mary,
you have found favour with God.
You will conceive and give birth to a son,
and you are to call him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High.
The Lord God will give him the throne of his Father David,
and he will reign over Jacob's descendents forever;
his kingdom will never end."

Well that explains what highly favoured means.
It doesn't mean having a comfortable and fun life.
It means that she gets to be part of God's plans to save the world.

To be highly favoured is to be part of God's plans.
In Mary's case, she has a unique place in God's plans.
There is only one person
who has had the Son of God growing in their tummy.
Mary is the only one.
She is indeed highly favoured.

But there's a lot for Mary to wrap her head around.
And in particular,
Mary has spied a difficulty with what the angel has said to her.
The angel says she's going to have a baby.
But, she knows the basic facts of biology.
She's a virgin.
That makes it pretty hard to have a baby.
So she has a question for the angel.
But is it OK to ask an angel a question?

Some people have had this terrible experience,
where they ask a genuine question
about some difficult to understand part of the faith.
And they get told something like this,
"Look darling, you just need to have faith.
It's impertinent to ask questions like that.
You just pray about it and ask God to help you trust him."
If you've ever been told something like that,
the most likely reason
is that the person you asked the question didn't know the answer.
And they didn't want to admit they didn't know the answer
because they were a teacher or in some position of authority.
And they felt undermined
by being asked a question they couldn't answer.
Or they might have felt like if they couldn't answer your question,
then you might stop believing in God.

Of course there's nothing wrong with a teacher saying,
"Look, that's an interesting question.

I don't know the answer to that one.
But I will get back to you."
So long as they actually do some research and get back to you.

But faith is not opposed to questions.
Faith is trusting in God.
You can trust someone and ask them questions as well.
Any parent of a four year old can tell you that.
Four year olds trust their parents but they ask them 'Why?' all the time.

That's not to say that all questions are good questions.
Some questions are a defence mechanism.
The person doesn't really want to hear an answer.
They are just asking a question
to demonstrate that they don't need to listen.
"What makes your sky fairy
different from all the other gods that people have worshiped in history?"
The person who asks that question isn't looking for an answer.
They are looking to justify their unbelief.

But genuine questions.
Questions that are really wanting to find out an answer.
These are not opposed to faith,
they build faith.
And that's the kind that Mary asked.
And the angel didn't tell her off.
The angel answered her question.
How will this be?
Well the Holy Spirit is going to come on you.
The power of the Most High will overshadow you.
I take it these are two ways of saying the same thing.
God is going to make you pregnant, Mary.
There is no action you need to take.
It's just going to happen.
Just to show you
that God is well and truly capable of making this happen,

you know your cousin Elizabeth.
She was well past the age of having kids.
Well she is six months pregnant.
God sent a message to her husband Zechariah.
And if God says it's going to happen,
then it's going to happen.
They said she couldn't have kids.
But they weren't counting on the power of God.
You can take that as reassurance.
What I've told you is going to happen as well.
So Mary asked her question.
And far from telling her to have more faith,
the angel answered her question.

I think the take home for us
is that there's nothing wrong with asking questions.
In fact, it's good to ask questions.
If you ask questions, genuine questions,
that shows that you are interested.
If you ask questions about the things of God,
then you are interested in the things of God.
That has to be a good thing, right?

Sometimes people ask me questions.
And they say something like,
"I hope I'm not intruding on your time.
I know you have all these important things to do."
Trust me,
I never feel like someone asking me questions is intruding on my time.
I spent 4 years at Ridley studying stuff because I'm interested in it.
You don't think Lane Prowd
would feel like it was an intrusion on his time
if you asked him about Tom Petty, do you?

So, the highly favoured person,
is the person who gets to be part of God's plans.

It's quite alright for them to have some questions along the way.
God doesn't look askance at genuine questions.
But what does God want?
God wants surrender.
Now there's an old fashioned word.
We pretty much only use it these days
when we are talking about running up the white flag in a war.
You know, the Germans surrendered to the Allies in 1945.
But back in the day,
surrender was a Christian word.
In 1896, they wrote one of the early Christian choruses.
I bet you know it.
"All to Jesus, I surrender,
all to him I freely give.
I will ever love and trust him,
in his presence daily live."
And then the chorus.
"I surrender all.
I surrender all.
All to thee my blessed Saviour,
I surrender all."
Surrender is about giving up your own will,
and doing what Jesus wills.

There is no more beautiful expression of surrender
than Mary's words in the last verse of our reading.
"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered.
"May your word to me be fulfilled."
It's beautiful, isn't it?
But maybe there is a more beautiful one.
Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.
"Father, if you are willing,
take this cup from me;
yet not my will,
but yours be done."
Surrender.

Total and perfect surrender.
It reminds me of another chorus
from around the same time as "I surrender all".
"Blessed Assurance" was 1873.
20 odd years before "I surrender all".
But it's the same era.
The third verse begins,
"Perfect submission, all is at rest."
Submission, surrender.
It's the same idea.
God's will not my will.
"May your word to me be fulfilled."
The writer of Blessed Assurance, Fanny Crosby was blind.
She knew a thing or two about submission to God's will.
Blindness is not an easy gift to accept from the Lord's hand.
But not easy for Mary either.
The angel gives her a word that will turn her life upside down.
And in many ways for her,
upside down in not a nice way.
"May your word to me be fulfilled."
Surrender.

How come we never talk about surrender today?
It's because today we have this incredible idea,
that God's job is to fix up the things I don't like about my life.
Instead of surrender we talk about victory.
In a war of course, surrender and victory are opposites.
Now there is a place for victory in the Christian life.
Jesus has won the victory over sin and evil and death.
But the victory is his victory.
And the plans are his plans.
His victory does become our victory.
But it's on his terms.
And that's where surrender comes in.
We get to walk in his victory,
surrendering to his will.

And that may well not have been
the way we would have chosen things to be.
"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered.
"May your word to me be fulfilled."

So the hidden meaning of Christmas.
Christmas means surrendering to God's will.
It did for Mary.
It does for you too.

I'm pretty sure it's not going to make it
onto the best seller lists on the Christmas cards.
"Surrender to God this Christmas."
I don't think it's going to take over from "Season's Greetings".
But it's a bona fide Christmas message.

Now I guess it's a bit easier for Mary
to know how she has to surrender than you or me.
She had an angel come and tell her exactly what was going to happen.
How do we surrender?
I guess the key thing is to accept it gracefully
when it becomes clear that God's plans for us are things we don't like.
I feel like a bit of a fraud telling you this stuff,
because I've lived such a blessed life,
it's been such a rare thing
that I've ever had to put up with major things going awry.
Lots of people have to put up with sickness
and deaths of people close to them,
their lives turned upside down by some disaster or other.
But I'll give you an example from my own life,
even though it is trivial.
Most of you will know that we've put a lot of work
into getting our kids to be able to play a musical instrument.
And it was definitely my dream
that my kids would be able to take music for their VCE
if they wanted to.

Well Emdwyn did want to last year.
But it just didn't work.
The school she was at didn't offer it.
We tried the school down the road from her school.
And it looked like it might work,
but it didn't.
And so we got to the point where we had to say,
"This just isn't going to work."
Now there's nothing about surrendering to God's will
that says that you can't give it a persistent try.
We knocked on lots of doors.
I think we had 4 meetings
with careers people and year level coordinators and what not.
It's not impious to give it a persistent try
because unlike Mary,
we don't have an angel telling us what God is going to do.
No angel visited me and said,
"Behold, the Lord has said that Emdwyn can't do her violin for VCE."
But you knock on the doors
and when they give a convincing slamming noise enough times,
you get the picture.
That's the Lord's will.
It's not what I would have chosen.
But I need to surrender to it.
What does that mean?
OK, I can stop railing against this now.
I need to accept that this is God's plan,
and thank God for good plans for me,
and move on.
I need to say 'no' to resentment.
It's no good Mary saying,
"You know, I would have loved to settle down with Joseph
and live the quiet life,
without all the drama of being the mother of the Son of God."
That's futile thinking.
You've got to avoid that.

Wishing things didn't happen God's way.
That's actually rebellious.
It's OK to ask your questions.
It's not OK to hold grudges against God.
It won't do you any good.
It poisons your mind.
It makes you bitter.
"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered.
"May your word to me be fulfilled."
That's the attitude.
Perhaps because very few of us will meet an angel,
we should say,
"I am the Lord's servant, may your will for me be fulfilled."
But we ought to practice saying that.

I told you I have led a blessed life.
I know it's not going to continue that way.
I'm getting older.
When you get older,
eventually things go wrong.
They have to.
You have kids.
Then you have grandkids.
Some of you even have great grandkids.
Just the number of people who are close to you grows.
Something will inevitably go wrong.
And in your own life.
Well age catches up with you.
No one is left unscathed.
I don't know what it will be.
But I can guarantee it will be something.
"I am the Lord's servant, may your will for me be fulfilled."
That's a hidden Christmas message.