

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen

Here's a "help wanted" ad that might have appeared in the Nazarene Courier-Times (the papyrus edition):

Wanted: Fertile teenager needed to gestate, birthe, nurture, and raise to adulthood the Son of God and long-awaited Savior of the World. Parental consent not required. The successful applicant will demonstrate the ability to withstand potential scandal as conception will occur out of wedlock (*suitable spouses are currently under consideration*). Though a husband will eventually be found, the candidate must possess the financial wherewithal—or the capacity to generate sufficient income—should said spouse make an untimely exit from the family, potentially leaving the successful candidate a single parent for some period of time before the Son reaches maturity. Hazardous duty pay may apply should it become necessary for the family to seek refugee status in a foreign country.

(*Now here's where we get to the fine print*). The successful applicant must also exhibit the fortitude necessary to withstand the notoriety attendant to being the mother of an itinerant and non-conformist spiritual leader who will eventually be tortured and executed as an enemy of the State, an execution you, as the mother, will witness in all its inhumane detail.

Note: Only "meek and mild" candidates need apply. Finalists for the position will be subject to psychological evaluation to ensure they meet this essential qualification, payable by the Employer. For further information, contact Gabriel, Archangel and Head of Human Resources at 1-800-2HEAVEN (that's 1-800-243-4286).

How in the world have the words “meek” and “mild” become associated with Mary? Nowhere in the New Testament is the word “meek” (*pra’oos*) or its near twin (*epieikeia*) applied to Mary. It’s used twice in Matthew: Blessed are the meek (*pra’oos*) says Jesus, and he describes himself as *pra’oos* in Chapter 11: Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle (*pra’oos*) and humble in heart.” We find it in the Epistles, too, describing Jesus’ attitude toward humans, and more importantly for us, as the way Christians should behave. If we, as one lexicon suggests, extend *praus* to mean “strength under control” such an appellation to Mary might make sense—but there is no scriptural basis for it.

The places where I find “meek” and “mild” attached to Mary are found in our hymnal. In this evening’s opening hymn, as a matter of fact, but also in half a dozen others, as well. And as I looked at these hymns, I wondered if there were some thread running among them that might explain why. The dates of authorship provide a clue, for they were written around the same time—the mid-19th century. That’s when Romanticism was at its height, that cultural break with the Enlightenment and rationalism that began to take root after the horrors of the French Revolution and peaked in the latter half of the 1800s. It’s also around the same time the Tractarians and the Oxford Movement gathered momentum, on both sides of the Atlantic. Coincidence?

Mary’s stature far outweighs what’s written about her in the New Testament. In all the letters Paul wrote, he mentions her just once and not by name, simply stating Christ was “born of a woman.” Mary is mentioned twice in Mark, but only once by name. Matthew includes her name in the genealogy, and referred to her in Joseph’s dream sequences, and then mentions her just twice more during Jesus’ ministry. Finally, in Luke and John, Mary speaks. Just four times, but

boy, do we learn a lot. Apart from tonight's Gospel lesson, there is Mary's reply to her cousin Elizabeth's greeting, the Magnificat which we recite every day in Evening Prayer. Here is Mary, the prophet, a perfect bookend to her Old Testament predecessor Miriam, simultaneously extolling God's faithfulness to and what he has already done for Israel and revealing to us the mission and ministry of God Incarnate, Her Son: inverting pyramids of power and wealth based on the economy of scarcity to one secure in the abundance and abiding faithfulness of God. Then there is Mary, concerned mother, admonishing a "lost" Jesus and pondering what his sassy comment might mean. And in John—who identifies her only as "the mother of Jesus," she tells her Son the host has run out of wine. Another sassy remark: Woman, what is that to you and me. My hour has not yet come." It is left to our imagination what sort of looks or words may have transpired between them) but Mary is unperturbed and simply walks over to the servants (someone else's servants, by the way) and orders them: Do whatever he tells you." Mary, the Influencer Extraordinaire. Two more silent and unnamed vignettes await: she is at the foot of Cross in John, and Luke tells us she is in the Upper Room with the disciples after Jesus ascends to heaven.

These brief encounters in Scripture reveal Mary as a contemplative, a prophet, a faithful disciple, a woman of strength and fortitude, a holy persuader of God in the Wedding at Cana—like Moses and Abraham. Mary is a confident woman: sure of herself and, more importantly, sure of God's faithfulness and power.

Mary, meek and mild? Hardly!!

We want our mothers (and our fathers, too—all parents, heck all political leaders, everyone!) to be of gentle spirit, but this is not the only attribute they need. I am convinced God chose to invite Mary to participate in his plan of Salvation from among all others for quite another reason, just as her Son would later invite only certain disciples to join his inner circle of Twelve.

Out of nowhere, Gabriel approaches Mary, startling her with his angelic pronouncement: “Hail, favored one!” She may be startled, but after the angel is finished speaking, she is self-possessed enough to ask “How will this be accomplished?” There is no talk of a spotless reputation lost, no consideration of the pros and cons that any one of us might undertake when engaged in something far less momentous, like choosing a college, or even the more mundane, buying a car. Mary responds simply with “what’s the plan?”

You see, in addition to possessing a discerning mind, a stout heart, and the contemplative spirit that she later displays, there is another, more essential quality: the ability to hear God’s call with an unwavering trust in God that allows her to respond with a resounding “yes.” A word that embraces this quality is “obedience” whose latin root comes from the word “audire” to hear. I am persuaded this is what sets Mary apart from all the rest.

Her obedience is not that of servant (though she would describe herself as one upon agreeing to do God’s will) but as one with complete agency, the free will to say “no.” Simply put, just as God has chosen Mary, Mary chooses God’s plan.

And her “yes!” is exquisite.

“Let it be” she says. An imperative. Where have we heard language like that before? “Fiat lux!” God said. “Let there be light.” God’s “Fiat”, that creative Word, brought the Universe into being. Mary’s “FIAT,” her consent, enabled the Word to become flesh through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Good News in all of this is what tonight’s Gospel reading reveals about God. First, God did not create humanity to be automatons, robots on autopilot but God endowed us with free will to choose to be in relationship with him and to participate in his plan of redeeming the world. Second, nothing is impossible for God. The gift of the Holy Spirit, which we receive at our baptism, will empower us to accomplish the part we play as agents in reconciling us all to one another and to God.

The challenge for us as Christians is—will we, like Mary, hear God when he calls us to act? And will we believe strongly enough that with God nothing is impossible to say “yes?”

“Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.” Amen.