

Advent 4. 09

1. Some time ago there was a movie or a television show called *Roots* based on a book, I believe, with that title. It told the story of an American slave. And today, as we sit here, we witness what to some may seem to be almost a miracle. Our first lady, Michelle Obama, is the descendant of slaves. Is that not a testimony to the greatness of our country, as well as to the greatness of the human spirit and what human beings can make of themselves? Could we not describe it as a hymn to human freedom, to the freedom which our country's Constitution recognizes, respects and encourages, but also to the freedom of individuals and what they make of their lives?

When we as Americans look at the lives of successful people, people who began poor but became rich or famous or successful in some particular field, whether of education or entertainment or business, we describe it as a harsh process which required work, work and more work. "They "clawed" their way to the top, we sometimes say. You remember the quip that genius is one percent natural endowment and 99 percent work. Look at the work which a candidate for political office goes through. He or she must put in long, long days, giving countless speeches and shaking thousands

of hands, often at ungodly hours of the morning when some voters have to go to work. Candidates need thick skins as well, because their personal lives become public property. And all this, as we used to say, for a perishable crown.

Today's readings, and indeed many of the Advent readings taken from what are called the infancy narratives given us in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, that is, the stories about the birth of the Lord and the events leading up to it, focus on human freedom. It is Joseph's response to his dreams which makes it possible for Mary to have her baby in peace rather than being hunted out of her village as a disreputable woman, or perhaps even put to death. You remember the passage from Matthew's first chapter, vv 18-25. And it is Mary's response to an angelic visitation which makes it possible, humanly speaking, for Jesus to be born. Luke 1: 34-36, 37-38.

Perhaps you don't want to pursue this thought, but someone could ask: Could Joseph have said no and thus brought about the shame or even death of Mary? Could Mary have said no and thus prevented the birth of Jesus? A foolish question, you might say. Of course not! God wanted it so, and humans must obey. But that is not the case with us. We disobey; we don't always do what God

asks of us? Was that also a possibility for them? St. Bernard, writing in the 1200s, portrays Mary as having a real choice and constructs the scene in this way. It is the reading for December 20 in the Divine Office.

Joseph and Mary said yes. And Jesus said yes too. In today's second reading from Hebrews we read: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight. Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.'"

Human freedom is so important. That is why parents are so careful with their children, trying to guide them in their early choices in life because these choices will determine their later choices, their entire lives.

Those of us who are older might be tempted to say that this question is not so important for us now since the major decisions of our lives, for the most part, have been made. That is true in one sense. But our lives are not over until they are over, and there are still choices to be made, important choice, choices which will determine what we bring to God when we draw our last breath.

What do we want to do with our lives now? That is still a question for all of us until the last moment of our lives. We want to live well. We want to say yes to what God asks of us. What does God ask of us right now? In his *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius speaks not of God but of Jesus, and he asks us to ask ourselves these three questions: “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?” Good questions always, even at Christmas time, or maybe especially at Christmas time.