

Philippians 2: 5-11; John 1: 1-5, 10-14 Christmas Day 2021

© C.E. Laufer 2021

There's a traditional Catholic carol, not well known in Australia but sung in Ireland, called the Seven Joys of Mary. It begins like this:

The first good joy that Mary had, it was the joy of one.
To see her own son, Jesus Christ, when he was first her son.

And so it goes on. Today, though, I want to talk, not of the seven joys of Mary, but of the seven choices of God.

We've heard a lot about choices lately. But we've heard a lot less about the consequences of our choices. And every choice has consequences, even God's choices.

God's first choice was to create the universe, through his Word. God spoke, and it was so. The consequence of creating a physical universe was that it had to have laws. For example, the law of gravity: it works down, not up.

God's second choice was to create humans, beings with free will, the ability to make choices. God could have made us like robots, automatically doing what is right and good. But God chose to make us human, able to choose. And that choice went pear shaped. Human beings started to make some very bad choices indeed.

So God made a third choice – to enter this world that God had made. But God's incarnation was not like the gods of the ancient myths who put on human form as if it were a suit of clothes. Those gods still had all their divine powers – and they used them, in human form. But when God the Son chose to become human, he emptied himself. Christ did not hold onto his divine rights – power, omniscience, immortality. Instead, he thought of the needs of his creatures. What do we need, in the midst of human suffering? We don't need an all powerful superman who has no understanding of our experience. What we need is someone who understands, who can walk alongside us, not as a superman but as someone who knows what it is to experience the toughness of human life. So, as our second reading said, Christ emptied himself, and became truly human.

Another hymn, from the Victorian era:

Thou didst leave thy throne and thy kingly crown
when thou camest to earth for me;
but in Bethlehem's home there was found no room
for thy holy nativity.

The One who held the universe in his hand was born in a stable. The Word through whom all things were created became a creature, fully human as we are. And so one of his names is Immanuel, which means, God with us.

The consequence of God's third choice was death. All humans die, so in choosing to become human, God chose to die. But Christ's death was not the peaceful death of old age after a full life. He chose to die alongside the marginalised, one with all those who have suffered injustice, prejudice, abuse. That was God's fourth choice.

The consequence was God's fifth choice – to break one of the rules of the universe that he himself set in place at the beginning: living things die, and death is the end. But God chose resurrection. God the Father, through the power of the Spirit, raised the Son from death. Ever after, evil and death cannot have the last word.

That left God with another choice: end it all, or return the gift of choice to us once again, but this time with the hope of resurrection. It is up to us now, to proclaim Christ's birth at Christmas, certainly, but also his death and resurrection, at Easter. God is with us, not just as Baby Jesus, but also as the crucified and risen one. God is with us in all our pain, and rejection, and even our death, so that we can be with him in resurrection.

There is a theme in God's six choices, a theme picked up in our second reading. Almighty God – all powerful, all knowing but also all loving – this God did not think of himself when making his choices. This God, the one who came as the Babe of Bethlehem, this God put aside his own desire, and power, and chose for us, out of love, even though it caused him suffering and death. Choosing for the sake of the other, out of love, is the ultimate message of Christmas.

And what of the seventh choice? That is in our hands. Will we take on board the message of Christmas, and make our choices even as God did, choosing what is best for others? or will we insist on our rights, our needs, our preferences? It is up to us.

'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.'

I cannot tell why he whom angels worship
should stoop to love the peoples of the earth,
or why as shepherd he should seek the wanderers
with his mysterious promise of new birth.
But this I know, that he was born of Mary,
when Bethlehem's manger was his only home,
and that he lived at Nazareth and laboured,
and so the saviour, saviour of the world did come.

Amen, and happy Christmas.

The words of the three hymns quoted in this sermon are in the public domain.