

King Ahaz is promised a sign: 'the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son', not because he wanted a sign, but he has rejected the prophet's advice to do nothing and trust entirely to God in the face of his enemies. The sign then is an affirmation that God will act whether Ahaz likes it or not. We don't know if this would have happened with Mary if she had continued to doubt the angel because she says 'yes' and becomes that 'maiden with child' or, just as well, that '*virgin* with child' because 'virgin' here can be understood as exactly the condition which enables God's will to be done in Mary. Unlike Ahaz, Mary is willing to subject herself to God's will because her virginity makes her the perfect vehicle for it. This is to understand virginity as a state of emptiness or innocence or openness where one's own self-will is surrendered, in one sense annihilated, so that it becomes entirely God's will instead. This is a place, of course, of great risk. In reflecting on Thomas Merton's feminine side or openness to the feminine, Susan McCaslim had this to say:

The way he makes a gift of his own fragility gives us hope that each of us, with our own finitudes, flaws and failures may also touch holy ground. He is not removed from us but a brother...when we read him, we are invited to linger at this juncture, this no-place (le point vierge or point of nothingness) where we don't know exactly who we are, where we are going or our final destination....

Vierge as a noun, can be rendered 'virgin' or 'maid' but as an adjective also as 'blank' (as on a blank page) and free. And part of Thomas Merton's search for the feminine is manifested in his great love for nature and the virgin forest he was surrounded by – virgin in the sense of old growth, untrammelled, as yet unused, and far from being the poorer for it, containing a richer diversity of life than any forest planted by human beings.

And so the child will be called holy and will be called son of God.

Or perhaps, just as well:

*Let the land and all it bears rejoice,
all the trees of the wood shout for joy,
at the presence of the Lord,
for he comes.*

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour