

NNR 12.12.10 6.30 P.M.

MOST BLESSED AMONG WOMEN LUKE 1:26-38

INTRODUCTION

Mary plays an important and vital role in the Christmas story. Catholic excess may cause Protestants to be cautious when contemplating the mother of our Lord, but it would be wrong if such caution meant that we ignore her altogether. After all, she has her place in the Gospel story and we can therefore learn from her just as much as we can from Peter or Paul or any other Biblical character.

Over the centuries the view of Mary and her role in the gospel story that has prevailed has been of a woman who is submissive, meek, and totally non-assertive. The carol we sang earlier, 'the angel Gabriel from heaven came', puts it in a nutshell when it speaks of lowly and gentle Mary meekly bowing her head. Mary has been made a model of ideal womanhood that has been used to enforce the dominance of men and the subservience of women. A social and political agenda has been operating here, illegitimately I believe.

Actually, I don't believe a word of it. Frankly, I think that picture of Mary is wrong. If we pay closer attention to the Gospel stories in which she has a part I believe we can discern a strong, feisty woman of character. In short, Mary was

A WOMAN WILLING TO TAKE RISKS

and to seize the initiative when necessary.

Take the story of the annunciation, for instance. There's no meek bowing of the head in the way Mary dares to question God. Quite remarkably for a woman who had probably only just entered her teens, when Gabriel tells her that she is to bear a child who will be the Son of God her first thought is to express a doubt: 'How can this be' she asks, 'since I am a virgin?' This is no unquestioning obedience that she displays here.

In fact, Mary is in a good Biblical tradition in speaking thus to the angel. One of the best and most stimulating books about the Old Testament I have ever read is called 'The Courage to Doubt'. Hebrew prophets and poets alike question the ways of God, and call God to account for how they perceive him to be acting. To question God and the apparent ways of God is not faithless. Rather, it is in such ways that faith grows, understanding of God's ways deepens, and relationships with him are built up.

The fiercely independent spirit of Mary is further revealed in the next story in the Gospel. Pregnancy can be hazardous but Mary is nevertheless willing to undertake the risk of a long journey to visit her sixth-month pregnant cousin, Elizabeth. The visit results in an excited outpouring of praise on the part of both women, and Mary utters the words of a song that has been regularly used in Christian worship down the centuries – the Magnificat.

And there's another thing. How could the words of the Magnificat ever be thought of as the words of a shy, retiring wallflower? Would someone who saw herself as meek and lowly ever dare to utter such defiant words about scattering the proud in the imagination of their hearts; about God casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly? Of course, Mary is singing of herself here, but they are still the words of a confident, self-assured young woman, and could never be imagined as coming from the lips of one who was lacking in self-esteem.

Cue the next story, 30 years later, this time from the Gospel of John. Jesus has just begun his ministry, when he finds himself, together with his disciples, invited to some wedding celebrations. Mary is there too. But, disaster of disasters, the wine runs out. And it is Mary who takes charge of the situation. She urges Jesus to do something. Jesus is uncertain whether he should perform a miracle or not. Maybe the time has not yet come for him to set out on the way that will eventually lead to his death. But Mary doesn't hesitate. She tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says. And thus she is used by God to prompt Jesus to embark on his journey to the cross. Secondly, Mary was

A WOMAN WILLING TO TRY EVEN IF SHE GOT IT WRONG

And sometimes Mary did get it wrong. Living in Nazareth, she must have been influenced to some extent by the general scepticism about Jesus that the other villagers displayed, which could be summed up in words such as, 'Who does he think he is?' So the Gospel story records on one occasion while Jesus was teaching in someone's house that he was told that his mother and his brothers and sisters were outside asking to see him. Perhaps his fame was becoming a source of embarrassment to them and they wanted to take him in hand and stop him from making too much of a fool of himself.

Jesus rejected this effort to silence him. 'Who are my mother and my brothers', he asked. And pointing to his listeners he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.' Well, if not a complete rejection, at least a mighty put down for Mary and her other children.

At least we can give Mary credit for this: only those who do nothing risk nothing. But people who attempt nothing also achieve nothing. Mary had the courage to act boldly. And sometimes, like us all, she got it wrong. Is it not better to risk that, rather than do nothing out of fear of making a mistake? Actually, by accepting the risk we may often find ourselves achieving much for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. But if we do fall flat on our faces, well, Christ will pick us up, dust us off, and set us on the right course. The past can be healed. Mistakes can be overcome. And there may be a deeper wholeness in having tried, failed, and been forgiven than if we had never tried in the first place. I think Mary teaches us that.

But the involvement of Mary in the story of Jesus is not yet over. Thirdly, we note that Mary was

A WOMAN WHO WAS WILLING TO FACE PAIN

This is where our second reading comes in: Mary standing at the foot of the cross, a scene that has caught the imagination of great composers down the generations. The words of what is known as the Stabat Mater have elicited some of the greatest and most profound music ever written, music that expresses the pain and sorrow Mary was experiencing as she stood there for all those hours.

Some years ago Charles Elliot, who was at that time the Director of Christian Aid, wrote a book called 'Praying the Kingdom'. In it he draws attention, amongst many other things, to the fact that when Jesus was arrested and condemned to die all the disciples ran away. Why was it, he asks, that the women stayed with Jesus in his suffering and agony, while the men, apart from the beloved disciple, were conspicuous by their absence? The answer he gives was that men are lesser creatures than women in at least this respect, they are unable to endure pain in the way that women can.

It took courage for Mary to stand at the foot of the cross and to see her son suffering as he was. Apart from the personal agony of seeing her beloved son dying in such a humiliating and inhumane way, she was also surrounded by Jesus' enemies who were mocking and taunting him. Was some of that hostility directed at her, too? It would have taken a strong person, one with iron in her soul, to be able to stand there for all the hours that Jesus hung on the cross and to be with him as he died. Pious, artistic imagination has also frequently portrayed in what are called pietas the distress and grief of Mary as she receives the dead body of Jesus as it is taken down from the cross.

Fourthly, I suggest that Mary was

A WOMAN WILLING TO OFFER HER STRENGTH TO GOD

It's only now that we have seen what a strong person Mary was that we can assess her wonderful submission in the story of the annunciation: 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' This is a person who is offering all her strength and resourcefulness to God, and finding in such adult dependence a mature relationship with God. It is emphatically not a weak person seeking to become childishly and irresponsibly dependent.

Sometimes the Christian faith is criticised because it is thought to keep people immature and dependent. Christians on this view are people who refuse to grow up, people who are so emotionally disabled that they need an emotional and spiritual crutch because they are unable to stand up by themselves on their own two feet.

Now, there may be a few who need a faith like that to begin with. But faith is never about staying in the same place. It is about growing up into the full stature of Christ, growing into that maturity of community and relationship that Paul writes about in Ephesians 4.

Mary has often been regarded as the model Christian, the ideal disciple. I think it is clear that how we perceive Mary will govern our view of what living the Christian life is all about. Is being a Christian really about being weak, submissive, and non-assertive people? Or is it about being strong and confident and offering all those strengths and gifts to God to be used for his glory in his service? Does saying 'yes' to God, as Mary said 'yes', imply a diminishment of personality or its enhancement?

CONCLUSION

Well, you can guess on which side of that question I come down! You see, the point of studying the life of Mary is to allow her to point us to her Son. Like mother, like son. The picture of Jesus the Gospels give us is one of a person who, like his mother was strong, confident and assertive. He was determined to uncover hypocrisy and to lead his people back into the true ways of God. And when he realised that this would cost him his life, it was with equal determination that he set his face to go to Jerusalem where he knew he would be handed over to his enemies and be crucified. To give over one's life in that way takes a strong and assertive person who is sure they have something worthwhile to give and that the laying down of their life will bring even greater fullness of life those for whom he died. And we are called to follow him, even to imitate him, not only in the example of his life, but also in the manner of his self-denial and cross-bearing. May God give us all the grace to do so. Amen