

## Sermon for 13<sup>th</sup> September 2009 St Mary – for our Patronal Festival

I'm a collector of postcards, as you'll know if you've been into my study. I was in the bookshop near Westminster Cathedral recently, and I thought I'd pick up a few images of Mary to help me prepare for this sermon. There were lots of images but I just couldn't buy Mary of the Sacred Heart, or the more elaborate Queen of Heaven pictures – it was my non-conformist roots screaming within me.

How do you picture Mary, mother of Jesus? How would you describe her? Obedient? Meek? Servant?

We don't often stop to think about Mary, other than to look at often rather gaudy iconography of her. Sacred art and Church history have given us a view of Mary as humble, in obedience to the messenger of God or in adoration of her infant son, or quietly regal, as the Queen of Heaven, or as St Mary the Virgin, the dedication of this church, kept eternally in a state of perfection despite biblical evidence that she went on to have several more children after Jesus.

Some elements of these images derive from the gospel accounts of Mary, but not many. Where in sacred art is the spirited Mary who sings a revolutionary song of praise to God? Where is the Mary who decides her son is mad and takes his brothers to sort him out (Mk 3:21)? Where is the Mary who searches endlessly for the lost 12-year-old Jesus and really lays into him when she finds him and promptly bundles him back off to Nazareth.

We don't often think what it must have been like for a teenage, single and pregnant Mary in Nazareth, with gossips round every corner, trying to hold on to the truth of the angel's message when everyone else must have had serious doubts about her sanity and her virtue. We don't think of her as a normal woman, fetching water, doing the cooking like other women.

I heard a talk at Greenbelt a few years ago, by John Bell, then leader of the Iona Community. He was studying Mary with a group of women in Glasgow, and this is what one of them said: 'I'll tell you why we've got such a miserable image of Mary. Who is who makes all the statues of the Virgin? Men. Who is it who paints all the pictures of her? Men. Who is it who writes all the poems about Mary? Men. And they make her out to be a wee quiet wimp in the hope that their wives will be just like Mary.' I'll let you ponder that one for yourselves.

I came across a striking sculpture of Mary outside Salisbury Cathedral. Here's a picture. This is a peasant woman, strong with all her physical work, tough with bringing up many children and being widowed at a young age; not physically beautiful, but with a dignity which shines out from her that's far more enduring than a pretty face. Is this closer to the real Mary? This is the sort of woman I can relate to - not a wee quiet wimp looking adoringly at a child from morning till night; but is a real mother with a tough life. We can see this woman, as the priest Simeon

prophesied, being able to endure the sword that will pierce her own heart when her son is betrayed, abandoned and murdered.

Mary didn't sing her song immediately after the angel's visit, she was much too shocked. The text says she was perplexed at the angel's greeting, but the Greek work is better translated 'deeply agitated'. Mary wasn't a meek soul who just accepted what God wanted for her, she struggled with it. I wonder what words she said between the angel's greeting and her eventual acceptance 'May it be to me according to your words'?

But when she's reflected on the message, and is with her cousin Elizabeth, who's also had a miraculous conception, Mary can open her heart to God and sing one of the most powerful praise songs in the Bible. The idea of reversal (the powerful being made low and the lowly being lifted up), the poetry and the sheer joy of this song have made it one of the church's favourite expressions of praise. There are echoes here of Hannah's song on leaving her son Samuel at the temple, and it draws on the prophecy of Isaiah we heard in our first reading, showing how God who has saved Israel in the past is doing so again.

Luke's picture of Mary is of a poetic theologian of the new age: she sees the events of her world, makes connections between them, draws deeply on her religious roots and pours this out in a beautiful hymn of praise. Surely it was this Mary who was Jesus' first teacher. Surely it was she who taught him of God's great deeds and moulded him into a truer understanding of his destiny as the healer of the sick, the outspoken prophet, the one who eat and drank with outcasts. Perhaps it was Mary who taught him the words from the start of that same chapter of Isaiah's prophecy that he would use 30 years later in the little synagogue in Nazareth, where he grew up: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and release to the prisoners."

This is not a wee quiet wimp, but an intelligent, articulate and bold woman, unafraid to sing her song for all to hear. I think this is this a truer picture of Mary that the ones we often settle for.

So I offer you this picture and my prayer that the images we have created for ourselves of Mary will be deepened and extended by God, that the images we have of Jesus and of God will be deepened and extended by our prayer life and our bible study as God opens our hearts to his will. And more than that, that our image of ourselves will deepen from what we see in the mirror, into what God sees in our hearts. So that we're not wee quiet wimps either, but the bold and unafraid people of God.

Blessings  
Gill