

20141221AdventIVSermon

Anglicans have a difficult time trying to fit Mary into our spirituality and churchmanship. Those from an Anglo-Catholic background, have no problem saying the Angelus at the end of the Sunday Eucharist - all turning to a Marian shrine to recite it. Those of a more evangelical protestant persuasion are afraid that too much respect towards her might look like increasing her status to a deity. Some medieval theologians even began to speak of a Quaternity rather than a Trinity and while Jesus is our redeemer or in Latin "Redemptor" Mary is sometimes referred to as "Co-redemptrix".

Because of these excesses, Protestants have tended to ignore Mary's role in the drama of salvation history. Us Anglicans are really stuck in the middle. Think of Cape Town Diocese for a moment there are lots of churches named St. Andrew's, St. Mark's, St. Stephens and St Paul's but very few named St. Mary's (though if you think about it Mary plays a bigger and more important role in biblical stories than Andrew, Mark, or Stephen).

Still, it is around Christmas time that Mary's memory is recalled with more respect. Many see in her the model of true motherhood. Many feminists see her as a control tool introduced by the patriarchal church ensuring that all women, like Mary should just say 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' But other feminists give her more value as been the archetypal role model of a woman. Here, they say, is Mary the Virgin who has known no man; she is her own person, unexploited; her identity is not given to her by any male, but is her own, a gift from God.

What is interesting is that if we look at the Bible, and Luke in particular, we see another picture. Luke does not exalt Mary as a goddess, or as a mother, or even as a woman. He sees her as having a more important role, as the ideal Christian. So in Luke's Gospel, Mary becomes the model for Christian discipleship, the person who all people, men and women alike should emulate, especially if they wish to become followers of her son, Jesus.

Perhaps because it is found only in Luke's Gospel this image of Mary is frequently overlooked. If that is the case what image do the other Gospel's have of her? In Mark, of course there is no infant narrative so Mary's most memorable appearance is when she and her other sons come to take Jesus home, thinking he had lost his mind with his weird preaching. Matthew does have an infant narrative, but it is Joseph who gets the visit from the Angel and Mary is hardly mentioned at all, though she is portrayed as being present at the empty tomb. John does not even seem to know her name! He merely refers to her as 'the Mother of Jesus' though I rather like the fact that the only things she says in John's Gospel is to the servants at the Wedding at Cana where she instructs them: "Do what ever HE tells you.", an instruction we should follow too.

As Christians it is our desire to be more like Christ and in Luke, Mary is the most Christ-like human being in the story. Her words to the angel, in this morning's Gospel make an interesting parallel to what Jesus later prays in the garden before his crucifixion: "Let it be with me according to your word" says Mary, while Jesus prays "Not my will but yours be done". In both these cases, the ideal response to God is presented as a combination of humble trust and obedience.

This morning's Gospel reading is also similar to some Old Testament texts in which there is a divine annunciation of a special birth: of Ishmael and also Isaac in Genesis and of Samson in Judges. The real focus of these announcements are not on the person to whom the announcement is made but on the child who is to be born: he will be great; he will be called the Son of the Most High; he will be given the throne of David and will reign over the kingdom of Israel forever.

But another comparison can be made with the form of an Old Testament call narrative. All of the elements typical to God calling a person to do what God wants can be found here: a greeting, a startled reaction, an exhortation not to fear, a divine commission, an objection, a reassurance, and the offer of a confirming sign. Similar patterns are found

in the call narratives of Moses in Exodus and Isaiah in Isaiah 6. Mary's final response, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord" can also be compared to the words of Samuel at his calling.

So if we do compare Mary's call in today's Gospel with the call of other Old Testament prophets we come to the conclusion that the focus of this passage is actually more on Mary than it is on Jesus. Mary is being called to a prophetic task; bearing and raising Jesus is that task. Some scholars have even said that in this passage, Luke is presenting Mary as a prophet and Jesus as her prophesy she has been called to bring to others.

One of the classical malapropism for Choir boys singing Christmas Carols is to call Mary "Most highly flavoured lady", This is quoting Luke who identifies her as the "favoured one" and as one who has "found favour with God". And later in the verses that follow our reading this morning, she will be described as "blessed" among women.

Luke wants to make sure we know why she is favoured and blessed. You see, she is not blessed because she is going to be the physical mother of Jesus, but because she believed God's word. So, whatever blessing and favour that Mary accrues is one in which we can all share. How? By emulating her. We cannot all be physical parents of Jesus, but we can believe God's word will be fulfilled in us and through us.

Luke found this sufficiently important to bring it up again and again. In Luke 8, Jesus tells a crowd of people, "My mother and my brothers are those who **hear the word of God and do it.**" His earthly family were faithful to him, but all people may be members of his family if they trust the word of God as his mother and brothers do.

Finally, in Luke 11, Jesus is teaching a crowd when a woman calls out, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that nursed you." This is a rather colourful way of saying, "How blessed it must have been to be your mother." This woman thinks it would be wonderful to be Jesus' mother because Jesus is a great man and a women's worth was often determined by the quality of sons they produced. Jesus completely rejects this rather sexist ideology and declares, "Blessed rather are those who hear God's word and obey it!"

What Jesus is saying is, "My mother is blessed, but not because her womb bore me or because her breasts nursed me! She is blessed because of her devotion and faithfulness to the word of God."

So on this Sunday when we remember Mary, the mother of our Lord, we must realise that we remember her not simply because she is the mother of Jesus but rather that she is an ideal role model for all followers of Jesus: a servant of God who embodies faith and faithfulness.