

MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS



John 2:3 "When the wine gave out (at the wedding in Cana of Galilee), the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'"

I have often wondered what kind of relationship Jesus had with his mother. Unfortunately, there are two big problems when considering the nature of Jesus and Mary's relationship. The first is that Mary is now often seen only through rose-tinted glasses. When one thinks of Jesus' mother, one often sees only Renaissance images of purity, innocence, and devotion. Over the

years the figure of Mary has become virtually deified. Mary's virginity, for example, became so important to the Greeks, that she is soon declared to have been a perpetual virgin, the Blessed Ever-Virgin Mary, despite the fact that the Scriptures name brothers and sisters for Jesus (Mt. 13.54-6; Mk. 6.2-3). In the same way, Joseph in later stories is often portrayed only as an elderly caretaker for Mary, not a true husband or lover. Eventually the Church declared that Mary was conceived by her parents immaculately and thus she herself was born without sin. And finally with the doctrine of the Assumption, Mary does not even die and decay as others do, but her body and soul are assumed to the firmaments, where she has become the Queen of Heaven. In the Roman Catholic Church, she even has the official title of Co-Redemptriss and the Matrix of All Graces. There are those who are seriously pushing for an enlargement of the Trinity to include her in a Quarternity of the Godhead in heaven. As a result of her elevation, it is sometimes hard to see the real down to earth aspects of Jesus' mother and her relationship with her son.

The second problem in understanding the relationship between Jesus and his mother is that Scripture does not tell us very much about Mary. She's really not a principal player in the story. In the birth narratives in the New Testament, Mary is clearly seen as a young, frightened and confused Jewish girl who

gave birth to Jesus. But between his birth and his death, Mary is mentioned in only three stories. And in each of those occasions there seems to be some very real human friction or estrangement even between Mary and her son Jesus. Mothers and sons often struggle in their relationship, and Jesus and his mother seem no different from others.

First there is the story told of Jesus' youth, when he was twelve years old and left behind in the Temple during Passover, which was our Gospel reading a couple of weeks ago. When after three days of searching Mary and Joseph finally find Jesus, his mother, with an obvious touch of frustration, exclaimed "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold your father and I have been looking for you anxiously . . . (And) when (Jesus) went down with (his parents) and came to Nazareth," we are told that "(he) was obedient to them." As a parent, I know that stern tone of voice and have used it often myself. All of our children wander off on their own at times and we become frightened for their safety. It is a very natural reaction, but clearly there is some tension here between mother and son.

Today's Gospel records friction again between Jesus and his mother at the famous wedding at Cana in Galilee, the next time we see Mary and Jesus together in the Scriptures. Mary informed her son that the wine for the wedding had given out, and he appeared to be extremely annoyed by her comment, in a way

familiar to all of us with mothers who sometimes pressure or put expectations on us. Jesus responded to her simple declaration that "they have no wine," with "O woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." (Jn. 2.1-12), although he is then compliant to her wishes. Again, all of our children have minds of their own that conflict with ours at times. The struggle of wills between parents and children are commonplace. Interestingly as well, Jesus always addresses his mother with the rather cold name of 'woman,' while preferring the very intimate Aramaic name of 'Abba' for his father in heaven.

Mark's Gospel (3.21, 33-33) notes the third and last story of Mary and Jesus between his birth and death. This is the time when Jesus returned to Nazareth in the early days of his ministry, great crowds followed him, we are told, so much so that he and his disciples could not even sit down to eat. When Jesus' family heard about his return and learned that certain people were saying that "Jesus was beside himself, that he was like a crazy man," literally 'out of his mind,' the family according to Scripture went out to seize him. Oh, how many parents have tried to rescue their children from desperate situations. But when Jesus heard that his mother and brothers had come, and were outside trying to get through the crowds, he replied, "Who are my mother and brothers?" and then looking around on those disciples sitting at his feet, replied "Here are

my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother," and apparently Jesus didn't see his family on that occasion. Many children rebel against their parents in seeking out their own destinies. It is not an unfamiliar story.

Mary is not heard of again in the Gospels until she appears at the foot of the Cross. Though there has been some tension between Mary and Jesus previously, she is there at his dying. Death often has a way of drawing families together, of focusing our attention upon our personal relationships, of concentrating our emotions on what is most important. And Jesus from the Cross lovingly discharges the care of his most Beloved Disciple to his mother, and her to him. "Woman, behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother." Mary is not mentioned again until in the Book of Acts, after the Ascension, when the disciples return to the Upper Room to pray, Mary and the brothers of Jesus are simply named among the people there (Acts 1.14).

Mary is not referred to by name again in the Scriptures and is rarely mentioned in early Christian writings until the late third century. But by the fourth century there are all sorts of stories and legends about her. But in them, she often loses her humanity. Gone is the fear, confusion, and disbelief of the young girl at the Annunciation, and gone is the natural tension between the mother and her son in Jerusalem, or at Cana in

Galilee, or at Nazareth. They are replaced by legend and myth, and as a consequence I think we often lose touch with the real Mary, the human mother of Jesus, and the nature of their very real human relationship.

The single most vivid and moving religious image that many Christians have retained over the years of the mother of Jesus is what the art world calls the *Pietà*, those various representations, often in sculpture, of Mary lamenting over the dead body of her son. Perhaps the most famous is Michelangelo's statue of that name in St. Peter's in Rome. Similarly, Franco Zeffirelli's portrayal of that image in his film production of *Jesus of Nazareth* haunts me still. There is the mother of Jesus, at the foot of the cross, rocking in her arms the limp body of her dead son, while the rain comes pouring down from grey skies, mingling with her tears, as she loudly wails and laments, her shoulders shaking with her grief. There are no words spoken; just cries of utter sorrow and despair, as though a sword has pierced her heart.

This emotional scene is not actually found in the biblical story, but it is a very human one. And that I think is how Mary, the mother of Jesus, is best remembered, in her very human struggle to love and to accept her child and the life he had chosen for himself. Oh, how difficult that must have been at times. Acceptance of our children and their decisions for their

lives is not always an easy thing for parents to do, it certainly wasn't for Mary, just as our own mothers so often struggle to love and accept us and the choices we have made. In Mary and Jesus' relationship, I think we can see something of ourselves, and the very real human struggles we have all had with our parents at times. AMEN.