

## MARY, THE SERVANT OF THE LORD



Luke 1:41 "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'"

Awhile back, as I was searching through boxes in the basement looking for the Christmas decorations, I came across an old black and white photograph of my mother, back on the beach in Australia, back before the war, before she had even met my dad, before she had really grown up and become a woman. She looked so very young in the photograph and so carefree that I did not recognize her at first. I thought to myself, "Whose picture is this? Oh my God, that's my mother!" I realized. There she was this vibrant young girl with her whole life ahead of

her. It was not at all the image that I had of her as my mother. Thus, I realized that our images of people sometimes limit us as to what we can actually see in them.

This is very clear to me in the way that Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been understood in the life of the Church. In the year 431, for example, four hundred years after the death of Jesus, the Christian Church met in Council in the ancient city of Ephesus to confront all the controversial questions about the exact nature of Jesus' divinity, that was dividing the Church into so many political and theological parties. The Council unrealistically hoped to settle the debate once and for all. Therefore, the Council, against great opposition, awarded Mary, the mother of Jesus, with the title of *Theotokos*, which translates from Greek as "Mother of God," as opposed to the title of *Christotokos*, "Mother of Christ" as suggested by the opponents. This dramatic new designation for Mary propelled her from a place of virtual obscurity in the early Church into the forefront of Christian theology, and she has remained there ever since.

Prior to the fifth century, within the Christian community little was known, and little was said about Mary. She just wasn't surprisingly an important figure in the life of the early Church. Within the New Testament Scriptures themselves, the few actual glimpses that we get of Mary, between the birth and death

of her son, suggest that she did not fully understand him or necessarily approve of her son's activities, and that their relationship was perhaps estranged. There was an obvious struggle and tension between mother and son at Jerusalem, when Jesus was twelve; and again, at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, when they ran out of wine; and again, at Jesus' homecoming to Nazareth, when his mother came with the family to seize Jesus and take him away because they literally thought he was out of his mind. And these three occasions are the only stories we have of Mary between Jesus' birth and death. Mary is mentioned again briefly at the foot of the cross, where she is quickly ushered away, and then appears one last time in the New Testament, in the Book of Acts, when she is casually mentioned as being among the crowd of Jesus' followers in the Upper Room, when the eleven disciples returned from the Mount of Olives and the Ascension of Jesus. That's it.

Mary plays a prominent role in the Scriptures only in the two birth narratives, which exist only in the first chapters of Matthew and Luke, and sadly conflict with each other significantly, with numerous details that are otherwise unmentioned and unknown in the Christian Scriptures. But after the Council of Ephesus, Mary's importance was suddenly rising in the eyes of the Church, fighting as they were about the nature of the Incarnation. Mary became *Theotokos*, the Mother of God.

Other stories of Mary were circulating and were now being promoted more widely than before, like her Perpetual Virginity, suggesting that Mary never really had other children or sexual relations with her husband, or her Assumption, suggesting that Mary never really died, and then, then in the Middle Ages, the Immaculate Conception, suggesting that Mary was free even from original sin. Later she is named the Queen of Heaven. In the last century, there was a move among Roman Catholics to include her in the Godhead, no longer a Trinity in their eyes, but now a Quarterernity. It seems to me that later Christians have so idolized Mary and exaggerated her place in the Church that we have difficulty sometimes maintaining any objectivity about her. She is now so often seen through rose tinted glasses that it is generally hard to discover the very real, young Jewish girl behind the contemporary images.

Thus, today's Gospel gives perhaps one of the best views of the real Mary, a young maiden betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. Betrothal, of course, was the first stage of Jewish marriage and was usually arranged by the parents. Girls were married very young in those days such that Mary was likely to be only 13 or 14 years old at the time of this story. She was probably anticipating with great excitement the prospects of her new life with Joseph. Marriage is one of the great passages in life. And as if those prospects were not

overwhelming enough, an Archangel named Gabriel is reported to have suddenly appeared to Mary when she was alone at Nazareth. She is described as frightened by the visitation, and Gabriel is visible in his attempt to comfort her and to calm her down, saying, "Do not be afraid, Mary." Do not be afraid. But his reassurances aside, I suspect that young Jewish girl remained very scared.

The news that the Angel brought her that she will conceive a son, who will be great and a king, was also disconcerting. And Mary is recorded as being troubled at the saying. She appears confused and uncertain what it meant. More particularly, she is doubtful that this can be so, since she had no husband and is a virgin. Mary cannot comprehend how the news of the Angel can occur, given the circumstances. Gabriel is again visibly aware of her doubts and apprehension. Yet he does not try to explain the mechanics of this event, mechanics that are still disputed to this day, instead he tries to reassure her of the power of God. "Mary," he says, "Behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth, she has also conceived a son, and she is old and was thought to be barren. But with God nothing is impossible." See there is your proof, Mary, there in your cousin's conception, and thus God can do this great thing by you, you can conceive by the Holy Spirit.

Given the prospect of what the Angel had to say, Mary was still bewildered by the consequences of accepting Gabriel's

message, but nonetheless agreed. 'Be it unto me according to thy word,' she famously said. What then was she to say to her betrothed, to Joseph? And how was she to explain her pregnancy to her parents, to her rabbi, and her friends in the village? The consequences of receiving the Angel's message must have been perceived as enormously isolating and dreadful to this young, frightened Jewish girl. Her betrothed, Joseph, we are told, was so upset by her news, that he vowed to divorce Mary, privately though, so as not to bring additional shame on her. Mary, we are told, soon fled to the hills, to the home of her cousin Elizabeth, far from the whispers and rumors in her hometown. It is not unusual even in our own day, for young, pregnant, unmarried girls to go visit relatives out of town for a time.

Thus, I have a fondness for this brief encounter between Mary and her older cousin Elizabeth, because it's so natural, so very human. Beyond the theological and political issues is this very human story of two pregnant women meeting and supporting each other, and their pregnancies binding them together and illuminating the moment.

The point is that this brief narrative was more than just a theological set-piece. It was a human story. It suggests the deep extent to which the entire Gospel narrative was a human story. John and Jesus were men of flesh-and-blood, called by God to serve their flesh-and-blood neighbors. And so, it isn't a

stretch to think of Jesus later connecting with lowly fishermen like Simon Peter or John the son of Zebedee, or a prostitute like Mary Magdalene, or Jesus changing his thinking as he learned more, as he grew up, and became mature, because at some point we all do these kinds of things. It's part of being fully human.

Christians need to get beyond the divine contours of the Infancy Narratives, of magical stars overhead, of strange exotic visitors from afar and angelic choruses singing in the clouds, and learn to grant to Jesus and John, and Mary and Elizabeth, that same humanity in their lives as in ours. Jesus and Mary didn't become statues around which an ambitious institution could construct itself. It was Jesus and Mary's humanity that provided the "sure foundation" for those who picked up their crosses and followed him.

We will all be better followers of Jesus, if we can set aside the supposed certainties of doctrine and tradition and worship – and emulate the very real man himself, and his very real mother, both struggling with their calls from God. Amen.