

The Blessed Virgin Mary (15 August)

Luke 1.46-55

Christ Church, Chelsea

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Today we celebrate Mary. But what are we celebrating? She is not, after all, God. But she is far more revered than most saints, and much of Catholic Europe (in an event which always seems designed to catch out holidaying Brits) will enjoy a bank holiday in her honour tomorrow. But devotion to Mary is also deeply controversial, and often one of the main markers of division between Catholics and Protestants. I want to suggest today that when we celebrate Mary we might be doing various different things. So I want to offer three ways in which Mary is deeply significant for Christian faith. Two of them I want to commend to you; the third I'm rather more cautious of... but we'll get there.

First, I want to commend to you Mary's life as a gripping story of what it was like to be someone close to Jesus. It is Mary who, at the Annunciation, learns from the Archangel Gabriel that she is to bear a son. It is Mary who is visited by her cousin Elizabeth, whose own unborn child John the Baptist leaps in Elizabeth's womb as he encounters the Son of God. It is Mary who, in the Christmas story, gives birth to Jesus, receives the shepherds and wise men, and then to avoid Herod's soldiers flees with Joseph and the baby Jesus into exile in Egypt. It is Mary who searches high and low for the twelve-year-old Jesus when they visit Jerusalem, only to find him debating with the teachers in the Temple. It is at the request of Mary that Jesus turns water into wine at the Cana wedding feast. It is Mary who hunts for Jesus one day, only to have him declare that all the people gathered around him are his mother, and brothers, and sisters. And it is Mary who, in the final hours of Jesus's life, stands at the foot of the cross, and watches him take his final breath.

None of the gospel writers are interested in characterisation, so despite these many mentions throughout the gospels there's much we don't know about

Mary. We don't know her height or her hair colour. We don't know what kind of personality she had, and we don't get explicit details on how she reacted to these many gospel events. But this void is an invitation to us to use our imaginations. Mary is one of those people, like Peter and Mary Magdalene, who interact with Jesus again and again. This is the first of our three reasons why Mary is so significant: to ponder Mary's life is to explore what it must be like to live alongside the incarnate God – in all its joy and sorrow.

The second reason, which I again commend to you, is that what we do know in the gospels of Mary's actions offers us an example of how we are to respond to God. The key moment here is the Annunciation. The scene is a startling one: the unexpected visit of an angel to an unmarried young woman in a small Judean hill town. The angel's news is hardly welcome – how is Mary to explain this unexpected pregnancy to her family; to her neighbours? But Mary's response to the angel is emblematic of how we might respond to God: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' (Luke 1.38) Mary offers a 'yes' to God – an acceptance of God's work in the world, even if it seems scary, or upending, or unbelievable. And, as we apply our imaginations, we might see that 'yes' in other aspects of Mary's life. Today's gospel reading, the Magnificat, is a 'yes' from Mary to the work of God who makes a world in which the last shall be first and the first shall be last. As she presents the baby Jesus in the Temple, the old man Simeon prophesies that 'a sword will pierce your own soul too'. Perhaps Mary's standing at the foot of the cross is a trusting 'yes' to knowing the pain of her son's execution – though we may also trust that she knew too the joy of his resurrection.

Mary's response to God sets a pattern for us to imitate. As our Gradual Hymn put it: 'For Mary, Mother of the Lord / God's holy name be praised, / who first the Son of God adored / as on her child she gazed.' We, like Mary, are called to have the trust and courage to say 'yes' to God, wherever it may lead us.

Mary's story offers us a way into pondering the life of Jesus alongside his friends and companions. Mary offers us an example of how we are to respond to God. These two reasons for Mary's significance are rightly deeply important for our faith. But there is a third aspect of Mary's significance which

is much more complex – and indeed, much more debateable in its value. This is where so much of the controversy between Catholics and Protestants over the significance of Mary is to be found. This third aspect is as follows.

Christians may for two thousand years have affirmed that God is beyond gender – that God is neither male nor female. And in the work of God through the Bible we see a range of attributes of God: creator; ruler; judge; king; compassionate; caring; forgiving; healing; loving. What's more, in some of these roles, God seems distant and abstract; in others, God is close, enjoyable, tangible.

How do we hold this all together? Sometimes, I'd suggest, Christians have found it fruitful to draw on Mary. And where some of these qualities of God have come to be seen as particularly feminine, some have found it easier to envisage them in Mary. Think, for example, of our typical images of Mary as the giver of maternal comfort and care.¹ Jesus himself shows care, and comfort, and compassion on many occasions, but perhaps this has sometimes seemed all too unmasculine. Or think of the various shrines to Mary across Europe; say, of the thousands who travel to Lourdes seeking, and often finding, healing in body, mind and spirit. Why associate Mary with healing? Why ask for Mary's intercessions, when the good news of the gospel centres on the promise that God is with us in Jesus, and the promise that we can, in the power of God's Spirit, commune directly with God?

Many faithful Christians clearly find a devotion to Mary as their carer, or forgiver, or healer, or lover, to aid them in ways that a devotion to God, or Christ, does not. And on this third way in which Mary is celebrated I am torn. I am, in honesty, not drawn to it myself. It seems to me to take away from the immediacy of our relationship with God, and limit our imagining of God who both rules the world and at the same time cares for us like a mother hen. But part of the wonder of faith lies in the many ways in which we come into relationship with the living God. This is the God we see made manifest in

¹ This is the approach taken by the current British Museum exhibition *Feminine Power: from the divine to the demonic*. It's an intriguing, if messy, exhibition – an examination of the diverse ways in which the divine (and sometimes the demonic) has been depicted in female form. In the final room, though, we come to a series of depictions of Mary – and in all cases it is of Mary as a maternal comforter. She holds the baby Jesus on her knee, and looks calm and dignified in a manner that, to any parents of a newborn child, must itself look like a miracle. There's lots to unpack here, and to do so would be a different sermon. Why feature Mary (who all Christians agree is not divine) in this exhibition? (I presume it was simply too hard to imagine leaving her out of such an exhibition.) More broadly, doesn't the presence of Mary in this exhibition show the difficulty with trying to explore the feminine aspect of religion solely through a survey of feminine deities (as opposed to looking more broadly at how women have been depicted in sacred roles, and also examining the roles that women have played in particular religions)?

Jesus, yet also the God who exists beyond all our human categories that shape our thinking, gender included. Now we see through a glass darkly, indeed.

So I commend to you two reasons why we might celebrate Mary today – two ways in which our devotion to Mary points us not to her but to the God made known in her son, Jesus. Mary's story offers us a way to imagine life with Christ. Mary's response to God is a model for our own response. And I invite us to ponder the ways in which our human assumptions about what it is to be male and female have limited our engagement with the totality of God.

'Surely', proclaims Mary, 'from now on all generations will call me blessed'. Blessed, indeed. But, as Mary continues, 'for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.' We give thanks for Mary's devotion, for her faithfulness, and for her role in God's work of salvation. And we ask that God may continue that good work of salvation in us, to the praise and glory of God.