

The Blessed Virgin Mary (tr. from 15 August)

Luke 1.46-55

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Christ Church, Chelsea

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Before Mary, there was another woman. In the beginning God created Adam, and Eve. The Book Genesis depicts their bliss in the Garden of Eden. But not for long. In chapter 3 of Genesis we hear the snake tempting the pair to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Then, we read:

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' (Gen 3.8-10)

The man and the woman hid themselves. The first effect of sin is a desire to hide. In particular, it's a desire to hide from God.

That's a striking image. Those of you who know the sculptures of Adam and Eve above the high altar at St Luke's will recognise it in those two figures.¹ They stand tall in those huge niches. But their heads are invisible, hidden behind crossed arms. Their first act is not to cover up their nakedness, but to cover their faces. Perhaps it is their shame.

¹ <https://artandchristianity.org/ecclesiart-listings/stephen-cox-adam-and-eve>

Perhaps it is their newfound awareness of the awesome otherness of God their creator. Whatever the reason, their sin brings them to hide.

And that act of hiding their faces is a very physical enactment of something else that Christian theologians have said about sin. Sin, thinkers from Augustine onwards have observed, is humanity *incurvatus in se* – humanity ‘curved in upon itself’. Think of how that affects us as individuals. There is indeed an ‘I’ in the middle of sin, and much of what sustains our sin is our deep-seated tendency to think of ourselves before others. Think of the parent who discovers that her desire for her children to flourish and succeed is driven by her own needs and insecurities. Or the young man who thinks of himself as a loving family member, but on hearing of an elderly relative’s illness thinks first of what he might stand to inherit.² It’s all too easy to become grudging, self-concerned, self-important. Like Adam and Eve, through sin we become curved in upon ourselves. And we try, like Adam and Eve, to hide the truth. We try to hide the truth from God. Often we even try to hide it from ourselves.³

So where does Mary fit into this picture? Well, as Christians have also observed since the earliest centuries, just as Christ is the second Adam, the figure who turns the old story of sin and death on its head, so is Mary the second Eve. ‘Hail!’, says the angel to Mary. And in Latin, that word ‘Hail’ is ‘Ave’. A, V, E – the reversal of E, V, A; Eva. As one medieval poet summed it up: ‘That angel who greets you with ‘Ave’

² Examples from <https://mbird.com/glossary/incurvatus-in-se/>. A third example given there was the martyr in T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, who finds that, deep down, his willingness to die for his faith is little more than a dramatic act of self-congratulation, an effort to prove his own piety to God and to others.

³ Another image is that of George Herbert’s poem *Sinnes Round*. It is a three stanza poem; the first line of the second and third stanzas repeats the last of the previous stanza, and the last line repeats the first. It is reminiscent of the rounds that one plays on recorder in primary school music lessons. Sin, as Mark Oakley puts it in commenting on this poem (*My Sour-Sweet Days*, p.82), is ‘repetitious, compulsive, and self-perpetuating’.

reverses sinful Eva's name. Lead us back, O holy Virgin, Whence the falling sinner came'.⁴ (That's rather pleasing, isn't it?!)

But it's not just a satisfying wordplay. When the angel appears to Mary, she doesn't try to hide or run off in fear. Her response to the news that she will bear a son who will be 'Emmanuel' – God with us – is simple: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (Luke 1.38).

And shortly after that moment she sings the song we heard in today's gospel reading: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.' (Luke 1.46b-49)

The theologian Simon Oliver urges us to notice something very important here. He writes:

Mary's soul 'magnifies' the Lord. To magnify means to make bigger. How could a creature 'magnify' God? What this means is that Mary does not draw attention to herself, but to God. She magnifies God in the sense that she points us to God's saving love. In doing so, God also magnifies her: he does great things for this lowly servant. As Mary is open to God and magnifies God, so her humanity is magnified – made fuller, more radiant, more beautiful.⁵

⁴ Quoted by Lewin, Katherine G (1999) *'Ave'/'Eva': Conflict and Parallelism in Depictions of the Virgin Mary and Eve*. MPhil thesis, University of Glasgow: <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/76070/>. The author is the eleventh-century reformer, Peter Damian. She cites the origins of the quotation in N. Broude and M. Garrard, eds, *Feminism and Art History*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p.84.

⁵ Simon Oliver, sermon preached at Durham Cathedral on 15 August 2019.

<https://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/worship-music/regular-services/sermon-archive/the-feast-of-the-blessed-virgin-mary>.

Eve stands for our human tendency to become curved in on ourselves. Mary is the human that we can, by God's grace, become: the human being who is fully alive.

Visit Ely Cathedral and its wonderful Lady Chapel to see this openness to God: the sculptor David Wynne depicts Mary with arms outstretched above her head – strong and assertive despite her lowly birth, yes, but above all opening her whole body and soul to God.⁶

Turn in, or turn out. As Simon Oliver continues: 'All of us, to some extent, remain closed in on ourselves, hiding as Adam and Eve hid. Mary shows us the fulness of a humanity that is fully open to God because it is open to Jesus Christ, a humanity that magnifies God and is itself magnified in God.'

And this life of openness is one that grows. When I seek more money, or power, I likely do so at the expense of someone else. I live a life that curves in on myself. Break that circle. Reverse the pattern of Adam and Eve. The things which matter most in life – trust, love, compassion, kindness, courage – all increase as we share them.⁷ Turn out to others. Share in these things, and life will improve for you, and for those with whom you share them. Magnify your humanity. And as you do so, like Mary, your soul will magnify the saving love of God.

⁶ E.g. <https://www.elycathedral.org/about/history-heritage/the-lady-chapel>

⁷ Mark Oakley, *My Sour-Sweet Days*, (SPCK, 2019), p.83.