

FESTIVAL OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
Sunday 16 August 2020

Readings: Isaiah 61.10-end; Galatians 4.4-7; Luke 1.46-55

In Magdala, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, there is a church built to commemorate Mary Magdalen. Although that church is dedicated to Mary Magdalen, it also commemorates many other women who played an important part in Jesus' life and their names are engraved boldly on supporting pillars throughout the church.

In looking today at another Mary, the mother of Jesus, I also want to look at other women who we will know well from the Bible, and who might influence our thinking about who Mary was, and what she might have been like.

We all have our own view of Mary, don't we? And our description, I suspect, may include words like: meek, mild, obedient, submissive. She's invariably depicted that way in paintings, sculptures and homilies, emphasising her submission to God's will as passivity, her obedience as subjection, and her saying "Yes" to God as being something sweet and feeble.

But where does our view have its roots, because if God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, I wonder what kind of person he chose. Innocent and pure? Probably. But feeble? This woman, after all, was to change history like no other woman before her or since, and become the mother of God's only Son.

We only have to examine Jesus' life and his interactions with women to learn that he didn't deal with women in a way which was typical of his male contemporaries. Jesus exalted women. He respected them. His interactions with women are an important element in the theological debate about Christianity and women, and women are prominent in the story of Jesus Christ. He was born of a woman; he had numerous interactions with women; after his resurrection, women saw him first; he commissioned the women to go and tell the disciples that he had risen – the essential message of Christianity.

Jesus went out of his way to welcome women at his table and in his ministry, and defied the traditional expectations of how women should be treated.

- He rejected cultural norms and spoke with women in public and refused to treat them as inferior. He recognised their dignity, their desires and their gifts.

- He cured a woman on the Sabbath by laying hands on her. Following the authorities' indignation, he gave her the title "Daughter of Abraham", a term never used before. ("Sons of Abraham" were male Jews bound by covenant to God). In using this term - "Daughter of Abraham" - Jesus gives this woman equal worth.
- At the well in Nablus, Jesus initiates a conversation with a Samaritan woman, breaking so many conventions, and also honouring her thirst for religious truth.
- As in the story of the bleeding woman, Jesus refuses to view women as unclean or especially deserving of punishment. He says nothing of her ritual impurity when she touches his cloak but, instead, calls her "daughter", heals her, and tells her to go in peace.
- Jesus recognises the dignity of women in situations that seem by ritual law to demand judgment: for example that of the woman caught in adultery. Instead, he sees the person as someone deserving compassion. In John's account of the woman caught in adultery, a trap is laid for Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees who bring the woman to Jesus present the case, the judgment and the punishment, and wait to see if he will reject the Mosaic law in favour of the woman. Jesus instead confronts them with a much more fundamental truth - that none of them is without sin.
- The familiar story of Martha and Mary highlights Jesus' acceptance and blessing of Mary's desire to learn. She is described as one who "sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak". This is the typical position of the male disciple. To sit at the feet of a rabbi meant that a person was one of his disciples.

It's particularly interesting that some women travelled with Jesus and ministered to him. In Luke 8, Jesus is described as journeying from village to village, preaching and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. His disciples were with him and several women: "*Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources*". Women were supporting Jesus and his disciples financially.

Mark's Gospel, too, tells of the women present at Jesus' crucifixion: "*These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.*" This picture of women disciples is astounding, given that Jewish women at this time were not to learn the Scriptures or even to

leave their households. Jesus was doing something startlingly new, and he was surrounded by some strong and inspirational women.

All four Gospels describe women disciples as the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Mary Magdalene sees Jesus and in John's account, recognises Jesus after hearing him call her name, testifying to their close relationship.

So, in the light of all that, let's think in more depth about Mary the mother of Jesus. I think that, if anyone needed to be strong, then it was surely her.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian killed by the Nazis in 1945, wrote: "*The Song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung*". It's clear here that Bonhoeffer is not thinking of the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary sometimes depicted in paintings, but a Mary who is passionate, surrendered, proud, and enthusiastic.

Mary was God's chosen one – chosen to bear His Son. But who was she? We suppose that when she was spoken to by the angel, she was perhaps in her mid-teens. She was about to become pregnant whilst unmarried and betrothed to Joseph. Any young girl expected to endure the practical and social implications of all that needed to be strong, not only having to suffer the stigma, but potentially to be treated as an outcast, and possibly lose the man she loved.

So I wonder whether our image of Mary as this ideal, meek, mild, and submissive woman is quite right.

Mary, after all, put Jesus in his place a time or two, as any other mother would and should - when he was twelve for not considering her and Joseph and staying behind in Jerusalem following the Passover, and at the wedding in Cana, before his ministry began, by bluntly telling him "They have no wine". When Jesus replied: "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come", she feistily ignored him, leaving him in a position where he had to do as she said. Then, turning to the servants, Mary told them: "Do whatever he tells you".

So let's think about our own view of Mary, what she might have been like, and whether (or how) that might affect us. I wonder if God really wanted the mother of his Son to be just blindly obedient and not think for herself at the expense of her own self-esteem. I've always felt that God wants and needs his followers to speak up for themselves and assert themselves, and that seems to be what Mary is doing in the words of the Magnificat (or The Song of Mary - Luke 1.46-55). The Magnificat is radical! It

champions the powerful being brought down from their thrones, the lowly being lifted up, the hungry being filled with good things, and the rich being sent away empty.

Celebrating Mary as we are doing today may certainly be about thanksgiving for her obedience, but hers was an obedience to a way of life that was radical. So was she really meek, mild, humble, and perhaps submissive? Or was she strong and feisty, with a deep faith as well as strong opinions of her own? You will doubtless formulate your own ideas as to what kind of person she might have been.

Today, regardless, we celebrate and give thanks to God for her place in history as the mother of Jesus. Amen.

Annie Billson