

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
The Song of Mary
Romans 16: 25-27
LUKE 1:26-38

MARY

“Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.”

How many people grew up with that prayer as part of their devotional life as Roman Catholics – and how many millions still cherish devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary as part of their spiritual life?

How many people in our world, on the other hand, would never dream of praying to Mary, perhaps rarely think of her except at Christmastime, and perhaps are almost “allergic” to the devotion some of their fellow Christians show to her?

Sadly, Mary has been an extremely controversial figure over the centuries. In the Middle Ages in Europe, some people confused praying to Mary with praying to statues of Mary, and in the most extreme days of the Protestant rebellion against the Pope in the 16th Century, mobs sometimes zealously removed statues from churches in the belief that such statues encouraged idolatry. Perhaps in reaction, the Roman Catholic Church changed its theology concerning Mary, raising her to a higher and higher level as late as the mid-19th- and mid-20th century with changes declaring that she herself was born without original sin (the doctrine of the immaculate conception) and that she herself ascended bodily into heaven without dying (the doctrine of bodily assumption), neither of which are supported by the Bible.

Where does the Episcopal Church stand on Mary and, more important, how can the faith, courage and witness of this great and good saint inspire all Christians today who are willing to look past the controversies of the centuries to the Mary of the Bible?

First of all, it is a cornerstone of Episcopal and Anglican theology that nothing can be required to be believed unless it is either in the Bible or provable from the Bible. So, those very recent doctrines of the immaculate conception and the bodily assumption into heaven of Mary are not part of Episcopal or Anglican theology. We also do not, typically, pray *to* saints; prayer is addressed *to* God the Father Almighty *through* Jesus Christ our Lord *in* the power of the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, Episcopalians do recognize certain people as “Saints” with a capital “S,” whose examples of faith and devotion to God are inspirational to us – though none of them were perfect; only Jesus walked the earth as a perfect person. The Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, was and *is* such a great saint and, like others of her rank, she is honored with her own Saint’s Day in our Episcopal calendars (copies of which are available in the Welcoming Area), which is August 15 – the same

day Roman Catholics celebrate as the day of her entrance into heaven. For many people in our world, Mary is an *accessible* figure, spiritually and emotionally. Even, believe it or not, for some Muslims. I learned during my 1994 trip to Jerusalem that some Muslim women particularly respect and revere Mary *because she was the mother of a son who was arrested and executed by an oppressive government*, and they can relate to that. Whether or not you would compare the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem to the occupation of the same territory by the Roman Empire 2,000 years ago, the fact is that some people do, and many remember Mary's suffering as her son was led away by foreign soldiers to die *because she went through what they have gone through* – or fear they might. There is a chapel within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (the site of Jesus' tomb) in Jerusalem, which is especially popular with Muslim women, who regard Jesus as a (not, of course **the**) prophet and relate to Mary, his mother.

I also remember vividly two incidents when I was in seminary and spent a summer as a chaplain trainee doing Clinical Pastoral Education at a major medical center hospital in Boston. I was assigned to visit every patient, through the summer, on a ward with people who had cancer and/or heart disease and/or diabetes. Two women with cancer, both of whom described themselves to me as "lapsed Roman Catholics," both told me that their images of God the Father Almighty were very cold, very remote – and very male, *and* that they felt the same way about Jesus, and doubted whether God really cared about them. "So," each said, "I pray to Mary, because she's a woman, and she understands."

I had a visceral reaction against this approach (which I tried hard not to show, chaplains aren't supposed to disrespect the spirituality of patients!) since I was raised in a very Protestant wing of the Episcopal Church, but I did continue to listen and discuss with each woman how their spirituality helped them in their great hour of need.

Afterwards, I reflected, suppose these women were Protestant *and* had the same image of God as remote, cold and uncaring – but had no Mary to turn to in their hour of need? "Thank God for Mary," I said to myself.

My own belief is that too much of Christian theology over the centuries has been shaped by stereotypically "male" images of God: all-powerful, all-seeing, judging, ruling, directing, Kingly – without the warm, empathetic, healing qualities we *also* associate with Jesus (as well as the other qualities) if we read all the stories about Jesus in the Bible. People centuries ago knew there was more to God than what they were taught, but the (overwhelmingly male) leaders of the Christian Church didn't see it that way, so gradually rank-and-file believers began to associate the warm and empathetic qualities they needed with Mary.

Male church leaders in the Middle Ages generally were happy to support the "cult" of Mary – as long as women didn't get the idea that *they* also could become leaders! So male leaders, I believe, increasingly emphasized the qualities in Mary which were unique – there can only be one Virgin Mother of God, after all – culminating in those more recent Roman Catholic doctrines of the immaculate conception and bodily assumption which raise her to a super-human level. Roman Catholic leaders also assert she was *perpetually* virgin, and that all the people who the Bible refers to as Jesus' "brothers and sisters" are actually his cousins, or that perhaps Joseph was widowed when

he married Mary and had children from his first wife. Both theories are based on no biblical evidence.

To be fair, plenty of male *Protestant* church leaders over the centuries have been equally eager to prevent women from becoming leaders. It was extremely controversial in Puritan Massachusetts in the 17th century when women wanted to lead Bible studies even just for *other women*, without a man present to tell them what to think.

All of this tells me that some *male* church leaders in many different churches over the centuries have never quite digested the “memo” from God which is in *Chapter One of Genesis*, the first Book of the Bible: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them...”

If both men *and* women are created in the image of God, aren’t both to be treated with equal respect, honor, and opportunities to let their spiritual gifts flourish? It’s about time.

So, I think a lot of the controversies about Mary were not really about Mary, but about what to do with a women who was called by God to a position of leadership and how threatening that was (and is) to some people.

But, after all, if God thought that the way things already are in the world is just fine, he wouldn’t have sent Jesus to offer all people forgiveness, transformation and new life! Mary was the first volunteer to help make possible the start of God’s transformation of the world through Jesus Christ: Mary, a woman born into an extremely chauvinistic, male-dominated, middle-Eastern culture; Mary, a Jew born in a land ruled by foreign, pagan conquerors; Mary, an apolitical, small town, working class woman born into a country dominated by highly partisan, big city elites.

What a great plan! From the moment of Mary’s first “yes” to God and Jesus’ conception, it was clear that God intended to transform the world. Thank God, that continues to be God’s plan.

From Mary we can learn that *anyone* can be an instrument of God’s transforming power, perhaps *especially* if you are not like the dominate powers in your society. Let’s look at some of those wonderfully subversive words of Mary in “The Song of Mary” we just said together (and which will also form the basis of our final hymn):

“God has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.”

For humble, God-fearing people who are hungry or lowly in any way, hearing God described like this is very Good News. For those who are the proud rich who are mighty and sitting on thrones, hearing God described like this is very threatening indeed.

Mary, go get 'em! Mary, Champion of the majority of the population against exploiters of all kinds! Mary, Champion of the faithful people of God against those who trample on God's laws! Mary, Champion of those who have usually not been respected or empowered! "You go, girl!"

We can all – yes, men and women alike – respect and follow the lead of Mary as she is described in the Bible. Mary is the willing servant of the Lord, who has faith even when God's plans are very new and different from what she expected. She persevered as a widowed single mother, "swam upstream" with strength against all the people who told her to sit down and shut up, courageously stood by her son at the foot of the cross next to those who had tortured him and, finally, celebrated the Great Good News of his resurrection with the community of the faithful.

This, final, Sunday of Advent, we also remember Mary's *pregnancy*, and how God's purposes for the world and for her were not, *before* Christmas, fully revealed. Many of us cannot or can no longer literally become pregnant, but each of us does have planted in our soul by God a "spiritual seed" of new purpose and possibility, which has not yet been "born" into our lives. May we, like Mary, be open to God's purposes for us and be part of the transformation of the world in accordance with God's will!

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