

The Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM)

A Sermon preached by Revd Andrew Wright on the Tenth Sunday of Trinity – the feast of the BVM – 16 August 2020.

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

A young cousin of mine, Fiona, died tragically at the age of 24, following a gas leak in her flat in Paris. She had arrived back home after a visit to the south of France. During that holiday she had sent a postcard to her parents using a quote, now well-known but then much less so. "There are two gifts that parents can give to their children", she had written, "the first is roots, the second is wings." And she concluded. "Thanks for them both." My aunt and uncle received that postcard after they had heard that she had died.

"Something about Mary" seems to be what is required as we celebrate the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I must admit to struggling with much of the stuff that has emerged around the BVM - the Mary of weeping statues in Ireland, the Mary of strange appearances in Lourdes or Guadalupe or Fatima, the Mary of later traditions, immaculately conceived, perpetually virgin, bodily assumed, source of miracles, the Mary on whom has been projected a plethora of myth-making. Millions I know have found this Mary helpful in their daily lives and on their spiritual journeys. I do not in any way disrespect that and fully appreciate the pulling power of such a Mary. Most of us are sustained by elements of myth, in the best sense of that word.

For me, however, such a Mary can detract from the deeply human rootedness in which lies the true power of the gospel. At the other end of the spectrum, therefore, I rather warm to the imagined Mary of Colm Toibin's novel "Testament of Mary". His Mary is definitely flesh and blood. Writing in old age from an Ephesus where she is fed and sheltered by the apostles but also controlled by them, facing pressure to testify to things as they want them to be rather than as she believes them to be. This Mary loves her son deeply, grieves his death still and confesses to having run away in fear from the cross. But this Mary believes her son was misled, that he has been a fool and that he is not what his followers want to make him. "I told him before he departed", she says, "that all my life when I have seen more than two men together I have seen foolishness and I have seen cruelty, but it is foolishness I have noticed first." We may not agree with this portrait but at least she feels like a real Mum, trying to make sense of the boy she raised and the man he had become, struggling with the hopes and regrets, the love and the loss, the hope and the disappointment, which is part of every parental journey.

The truth is that we don't in fact learn much about Mary from the Bible. Plenty of space is left for filling in the gaps! She features big-time, of course, in the nativity stories of Luke and Matthew - and in Luke there is that strange bonus episode when, on a childhood visit to Jerusalem, Jesus goes missing for three days. His very worried and upset parents eventually track him down to the Temple where he is rather precociously holding forth with the teachers. Later, during his public ministry, there are brief references to his mother and brothers turning up while he is preaching. When told they are waiting outside for him, Jesus sounds slightly dismissive, pointing to everyone else in the room and indicating that any "who do the will of God are his mother, brother and sisters" now. Another brief reference comes during a visit to Nazareth, when he is recognised as the son of Mary, resented for his somewhat off the wall teaching and seemingly forced to leave town - no doubt embarrassing, or even scary, for his family. In John's gospel Mary features at the wedding at Cana, suggesting to the steward that he looks to Jesus for help when the wine runs out. Again, at face value Jesus' response seems offhand to say the least "Woman, what have you to do with me?". While we can spiritualise and contextualise these apparently hurtful incidents, they are moments which perhaps many parents can identify with. Having Jesus as a son must have had its challenges! He cannot have made normal family life easy. He must have caused his mother more than an occasional sleepless night! It is perhaps no surprise that old Simeon prophecies to Mary that "a sword will pierce your own soul also". This saying finds its culmination in the crucifixion, although it is only in John's gospel that Mary explicitly appears at the foot of the cross - albeit in Acts she is recorded as having been in the upper room in Jerusalem with the other disciples in the days after the Good Friday and Easter events.

At one level, and most especially in the birth narratives, Mary is used by the Gospel writers as something of a signpost. In today's gospel the Magnificat is on her lips. Luke seems to believe that there's nothing quite like a song to convey the power of what lies at the heart of his gospel. This part of his narrative contains four songs, all well known to us - all in quick succession. Mary's Magnificat, Zecharias' Benedictus, the heavenly Gloria sung to the shepherds in the fields and Simeon's Nunc Dimittis. With deep roots in the

Old Testament and the long-held hopes held by Israel, all four are used to underpin poetically the world-changing nature of Jesus' birth. And what vehicles they have been for the praise of future generations. "For behold henceforth all generations will call me blessed, for he who is mighty has done great things for me.....he has put down the mighty from their thrones....he has filled the hungry with good things." Listen folks, says Luke through Mary, this is an incredible moment. At the human level Mary and Elizabeth celebrate together the excitement of the new lives they feel within them. Way beyond this, however, for Luke, the function of this story is to set the scene, to point his readers to the profundity of this moment in history.

But Mary in these birth narratives has an even more important theological function, one referred to also by Paul in today's Epistle. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman....". From the earliest days of the Church, Jesus came to be recognised not just as a prophet and teacher as so many before, but as the incarnate Son of God and the instigator through birth, death and resurrection of the long expected new kingdom. Mary is God's willing partner, says Luke, in the salvation of the world. Jesus is extraordinarily both Son of God and son of Mary. That is why Luke and Matthew, although in different ways, give so much time to what we have come to call the Christmas events.

Yes, Mary is used as a signpost, as a witness. Yes, Mary's role is seen as integral in what the early church came to understand as incarnation. That continued witness through the pages of the gospels to the undergirding and earth-shaking tenets of our faith make her a continued blessing to us all. But in preparing this sermon it was the flesh and blood Mary in all her humanity in which I found blessing, especially in these difficult times. Reflect for a minute on the homeless Mother of the nativity story, the refugee mother of Matthew's flight to Egypt, the panicked Mother desperately searching for her lost boy after the visit to Jerusalem, the slightly humiliated Mother made to wait by Jesus, the anguished mother at the foot of the cross and the grieving mother of the upper room. Even in terms of straight Bible story there is so much with which we can identify - and beyond that we can indeed imagine so much more. So much torment, so much pain. No wonder that so many have found in her inspiration, empathy and comfort. If she could remain hopeful and patient through it all and see the opportunity of new world and new life beyond, surely so can we. In these Covid times perhaps we need that inspiration more than ever.

I want to finish on that theme of partnership. The whole Bible is really God's call into a saving relationship and partnership with God. Mary models such partnership. Talk about roots and wings. How influential Mary must have been in nurturing Jesus in his faith and thinking. She must have encouraged him to be open to new ideas - and he certainly took wing, if not perhaps in quite the way she might have envisaged. She is also a potent reminder that such partnership is not an easy ride. If we want a "say your prayers, go to church, expect a comfortable ride and find easy solutions" kind of faith then Mary is a reminder that it is never so. Her partnership with God was world changing but it was hard and sacrificial and marked by tears - and no doubt at times left her full of questions and brimming with fears and frustrations. We too are called into partnership with God, a partnership which commits us to our part in building his kingdom. We too can expect that to bring its fair share of blood, toil, tears and sweat. Mary, as the mother of Jesus, never expected to change the world but she did - and so can we.

Perhaps if Jesus had left a note for his mother, it too might have read "There are two gifts which parents can give to their children, the first is roots, the second is wings. Thanks for them both"

And so we might echo... in any conversation with Mary, thanking her for giving us Jesus, and through him the gift of roots and wings - the roots we find in the fathomless love of God and the wings to which we are called in his loving and kingdom-building service. The roots and wings which help us begin to make sense of our lives, and indeed give us some points of reference in our suffering and confusing world.

It is not for nothing that we echo the words of the Magnificat. For behold from henceforth all generations will call her blessed. Amen