

recovery of the feminine

a sermon preached on the feast of

Mary, Mother of our Lord

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The Lections: Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:1-7

The triumph of reason, science, technology, and democratic capitalism can be observed in virtually every domain of life. We marvel at our high-tech inventions, the wizardry of medical technicians who can replace or fix almost anything. We delight in our freedom to criss-cross the globe in A380s, to come and go as we please, to live where and how we want, with as many houses and cars as we see fit, to consume vast quantities of goods manufactured in countries where the people making them are paid a pittance. We have convinced ourselves that standard of living is measured by GDP, CPI, ASX200, Dow Jones – and that wealth is the justified reward of those who work hard.

Yet we do not seem to be able to solve our problems. And in spite of our cleverness and our wealth we are not especially happy. No matter how much money, nor how many consultant-rate experts, we throw at the world's problems, lasting solutions elude us. A deadly Ebola outbreak in West Africa is just the latest reminder that the plight of the poorest has the potential to seriously affect the richest – in spite of our 'sovereign borders' strategy to insulate the 'lucky country' from other peoples' troubles. For decades an army of scientists across a range of disciplines has been warning us that our wealth strategies and our planet's capacity to withstand them are on a collision course. A commentator in this weekend's *Australian* newspaper – in an article entitled 'The West must lose no time in helping to destroy the Islamic State'¹ – exposes the neurotic fear and the lethal streak lurking beneath our supposedly civilised veneer. Christianity remains defensive, addicted to the religious drug 'crusade'. If we Westerners are so advanced and so successful, then why are prescribing rates of antidepressant medications increasing – Australia now the second highest among OECD nations?² (In saying this I'm talking, of course, not about specific and individual need, but of the large-scale collective trend.)

Here is a possibility which it seems to me ought at least to be examined very carefully. Our best efforts to solve the world's complex problems and to make ourselves happy are predominantly rationalistic, mechanistic, addicted to 'the market'. Like all addicts, we can't see any viable alternative. Persons and planet alike are regarded as things to be manipulated – weighed up on a profit-and-loss statement.

The fact that women and children and the poor and the earth herself pay the heaviest price could alert us. Then it would be clear that the feminine has suffered appallingly at the hands of patriarchal power – and its modern mutation, rationalistic science and economics. As so many experts have been observing for some time, the feminine has been deeply wounded – *in both women and men*. Mother earth herself is being profoundly afflicted.

The feast of Mary the Mother of Our Lord alerts us to the significance of the feminine in early Christian communities. Jesus' choice of companions expressed a radical reversal of patriarchal power. Mary the Mother of Our Lord was one of a band of influential women leaders of the early church. It was Mary and the other women who remained faithful to Jesus in his passion and death. Mary's great liberation song³ articulates a Christocentric vision far exceeding the feeble ramblings of the mostly-insecure, and somewhat-narcissistic men.

However, it did not take the church long to subvert Jesus' valuing of the feminine. Mary, the Gospel's towering model of discipleship, became the church's trivialised, desexualised, subordinated, sentimentalised projection – legitimating male power at the hands of a celibate male priestly caste who constructed her so. Popular piety and the images of Mary reinforce a deeply distorted model of womanhood and motherhood. We might suspect lurking here Peter the insecure patriarch of Rome with his jangling keys to the kingdom – along with all his successors and co-defenders.

Peter's Father God threatens people and species and even planet with annihilation – in spite of all the talk of love, gripped from time to time with fits of lethal and vindictive rage. The patriarchal religion of the

¹ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/the-west-must-lose-no-time-in-helping-to-destroy-the-islamic-state/story-e6frg6z6-1227026168297#>

² <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-22/australia-second-in-world-in-anti-depressant-prescriptions/5110084>

³ Luke 1:46-55

Hebrew peoples – goaded on by its somewhat insecure and at times depressed-sounding Father God who needed constant affirmation and adulation – did its level best to exterminate all traces of the feminine divine from the land, a land ironically described as flowing with milk and honey.

In this light it's not surprising that Mary subsequently became the feminine compensation within patriarchal, rationalistic church hierarchy – Mary the soft edge to God the impossible-to-please judge, ruler, and omniscient potentate, Mary the church's unofficial compensatory goddess, albeit in a patriarchally constructed domesticated form.

Many have observed that the recovery of the feminine has become critical – the stakes in our time now dangerously high. Our science, technology and economics are like soldiers without eyes or heart, desperately in need of its compensatory feminine. This is true in both women and men, for it is now clear that there's no guarantee that the presence of a woman within the structures of materialistic-rationalistic collective power structures guarantees the presence of the feminine.

There is a deep longing for wholeness, for completion – for the consummation of what St Paul calls the **πληρωμα** *plērōma*, the fullness. We can see this in every part of the world. We know it in the very depths of our being. We catch a glimpse in this and every Eucharist – and wherever and whenever life is lived eucharistically. Teilhard de Chardin wrote: “Everything in the universe is made by union and generation – by the coming together of elements that seek out one another, melt together two by two, and are born again in a third”.⁴ This long-known ‘law of the soul’ is now being corroborated by the laws of quantum physics!

Mary's Magnificat can be heard, then, in precisely this manner: through the shocking reversals of powerful and lowly, of hungry and rich, point to eternal union and generation. The symbol of Mary hints that the ‘solutions’ to our planetary problems are to be found by means of a deep transformation – a reversal, a melting and being born again, a union of opposites. No matter how remarkable our materialistic successes, what we desire eludes us. Of course, we have no choice but to throw our best energies at material advancement. But we do so at our peril if we overlook the factor which makes the crucial difference: what we desire to accomplish exteriorly must first be undergone interiorly.

And now every person bears this sacred responsibility. As Meister Eckhart famously declared: ‘What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?’

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