

there's something about mary

a sermon preached on the feast of

Mary, Mother of Our Lord

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the lections: Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Luke 1:46-55, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:1-7

There's 'something about Mary' – to borrow from the 1998 Hollywood movie title. In spite of puritan extremism – no matter how much neurotic icon-smashers have tried to stamp her out – Mary simply can't be removed from Christian spirituality.

For the biblical fact of the matter – as the ARCIC statement 'Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ' reminds us – is that it's "impossible to be faithful to Scripture without giving due attention to the person of Mary".¹ The angel visits Mary with astounding news.² Mary's 'Yes!' – her self-emptying *fiat*³ – is the "model of holiness, faith and obedience for all Christians".⁴ Mary visits her pregnant cousin Elizabeth⁵ – the Baptist-in-utero's leaping about prompting Mary's ecstatic utterance known to us as the Magnificat,⁶ arguably the 'gold standard' of Christian social responsibility.⁷ Mary presents her 40-day old baby in the Jerusalem temple – accepting old Simeon's promise of both her son's spiritual pre-eminence and the necessity of her own suffering soul.⁸ Mary travels with her divine Son, encouraging others to embody her discipleship 'Yes': "Do whatever he tells you".⁹ Mary remains faithful 'drinking Christ's cup'¹⁰ to the last dregs, enduring the self-emptying, the stripping, a mother's own dying as she stands by her dying son.¹¹

Indeed, there is no story of Jesus apart from the story of the one whom Christian tradition calls **Θεοτοκος** *Theotokos*: the God-bearer.¹²

Mary **Θεοτοκος** is also known in Christian tradition by a multitude of names: Mystical Rose; Morning Star; Queen of Heaven; Ever-virgin; Mother most pure; Eternal Woman; the sacrament of the motherly tenderness of God.¹³ She is reckoned to be Revelation's "woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars".¹⁴ In her cousin Elizabeth's ecstatic utterance – prompted by Mary's visit, and the foetus' response within her – Elizabeth proclaims one of Mary's best-known identities: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb [Jesus]".¹⁵ Combine that with the angel's greeting – "Hail, favoured one! The Lord is with you"¹⁶ – and we have the essence of the 'Hail Mary' prayer.¹⁷

Mary's prominence in popular spirituality and piety has always increased during times of church-institutional chaos. She is arguably the inevitable necessary compensation for patriarchal church culture. She is certainly a welcome and life-giving leavening in the midst of dry, cerebral, intellectualist, rationalism. As with all periods of oppression and tyranny, the spirit of Mary has at times simply gone 'underground' – out of sight of the tyrannisers, quietly, invisibly supporting the

¹ Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), 'Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ', 2 February 2004, para 77. http://www.ecumenism.net/archive/arcic/mary_en.htm

² Luke 1:26-38

³ Luke 1:38 "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be (Latin: *fiat*) with me according to your word".

⁴ 'Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ', para 76.

⁵ Luke 1:39-45

⁶ Luke 1:46-55

⁷ 'Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ', para 76; "in her song [Mary] proclaims the eschatological reversal which will be at the heart of her son's proclamation of the Kingdom of God.", para 14.

⁸ Luke 2:22-28

⁹ John 2:5

¹⁰ Mark 10:38; Matthew 20:22

¹¹ John 19:25-27

¹² Anglicans join all orthodox and catholic Christians in affirming Mary as **Θεοτοκος**. See 'Mary, grace and Hope in Christ' paras 31-34, 76.

¹³ Leonardo Boff (trans. Robert R Barr, John W Diercksmeier), **The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions**, London: Collins Religious, 1989, p254.

¹⁴ Revelation 12:1

¹⁵ Luke 1:42

¹⁶ Luke 1:28

¹⁷ With all orthodox and catholic Christians Anglicans affirm that "Mary has a continuing ministry which serves the ministry of Christ, our unique mediator, that Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church and that the practice of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us is not communion-dividing". 'Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ', para 78.

spirit of the faithful – waiting for her reappearance at the opportune time. Hence, whenever the church has become dangerously patriarchal and stiflingly rationalistic, Mary has made herself known to the faithful in the form of dreams, visions and apparitions.

There is indeed something about Mary!

In today's familiar gospel story – against a backdrop of patriarchal power and imperial machination – we read of a deceptively mundane and thoroughly domestic event: “the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in an animal feeding trough.”¹⁸ From the vantage point of empire and institutional religion, this is the quiet and invisible work of lady Wisdom, Sophia, the Divine feminine. When the world is stuck – just as it was at the turn of first century Palestine, and just as our world is stuck in so many ways right now – the Divine feminine accomplishes her work out of sight.

Mary Θεοτοκος is the latest and the greatest, for Christians, in a very long line of Divine feminine manifestations: the one “created... at the beginning of [the LORD's] work, the first of the LORD's acts long ago... before the beginning of the earth.”¹⁹ “she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty... a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, an image of [God's] goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets.”²⁰

Little wonder Mary has held such prominence in Christian history – in light of its thoroughgoing patriarchalism, and it's deadly dry and life-less rationalism. The more the church has imposed dogma as moralising rule or propositions to be ‘believed in’, up in the head – the more the faithful have needed renewing in the Divine feminine.

The Spirit has been speaking to the church about this through the voices of a great many feminist theologians, too many to name just now.²¹ Because there's a kind of moving confessional quality about a man admitting to the imbalance of rationality and patriarchy, it's worth hearing some of the conclusion to the 20th century Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff's ground-breaking 1979 study, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions*.

The feminine gives us to see another form of being human and civilized. The last several millennia have been lived under the dominance of the masculine... characterized mainly by *logos* – rationality, concept. *Logos* introduces a division between humanity and nature. It turns human beings into rulers of the earth, who subjugate the forces of nature and alter her balance. This mode of civilized being has produced its positive fruits, as well as the dilemmas that so gravely threaten our life in this planet today.

In this context, the feminine emerges as the possibility of an escape between the horns: neither to continue as we have been, nor to regress to the models of a feminine agrarian civilization, but to make room for the feminine dimension in our own culture. Through the feminine we make ourselves capable of another kind of relationship, more communal, more tender, more in solidarity with our roots in cosmos and earth. All great human beings, all profoundly integrated human personalities, have been gentle spirits who have valued the expressions of the anima.²²

This is an accurate description of the One born when the ‘fullness of time had come’ – “born of a woman, born under the law”,²³ Jesus the Christ. Mary Θεοτοκος emerges in human history as the latest and greatest manifestation of the Divine feminine – but not as an end in herself. Rather, Mary appears silently and invisibly as the means by which human history itself might find the possibility of an ‘escape between the horns’, becoming like the One to whom her faithful and costly life points: the One in whom masculine and feminine principles are profoundly integrated, Jesus the Christ.

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¹⁸ Luke 2:6-7

¹⁹ Proverbs 8:22-23

²⁰ Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-27

²¹ For example: D Donnelly (ed) *Mary, Woman of Nazareth: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989; Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1984; Josephine Griffiths, *The Reclaiming of Wisdom: The Restoration of the Feminine in Christianity*, London: Avon Books, 1984; Catherine Mowry LaCugna (ed.), *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, New York: HarperCollins, 1993; Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Boston: Shambhala, 2008; Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, London: SCM Press, 1995; Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM Press, 1983.

²² Leonardo Boff, p 254.

²³ Galatians 4:4-5