

mary, our welcome companion

a sermon preached on the

feast of mary, mother of our lord

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the lections: Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3; Psalm 45; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:1-7.

Do you have someone in your family you find embarrassing or don't particularly like? Someone who is always left off the list when family events require a formal invitation? We have, in my family. And I know she knows because she said to me once, "I only see you at funerals. Of course, you don't need an invitation to a funeral!"

Embarrassing and unwelcome when we gather, is how some Anglicans treat Mary, the mother of Our Lord. There are some historical reasons why that became the situation, but no excuses.

It's true that at times *excessive* claims have been made for Mary's role in our salvation. Sometimes people thought they could sort of get around Jesus if they went straight to his mother to ask for favours. After all, at that wedding in Cana of Galilee, it was Mary who told Jesus to do something about the wine running out.

But none of those excess or past misunderstandings need shape our responses to Mary, the young Jewish woman in whom the Word became flesh, through whom Jesus came to birth. She was probably only fourteen or fifteen when she became his mother. We so easily forget that behind the familiar words of the gospel stories there is a real person, who can be real for us in our lives, as we seek to imitate her listening and acting on God's invitation.

There is a joke about the seminary professor who, up to date with the latest biblical scholarship, reminded her class the Jesus was first and foremost a Jewish man. A voice from the back of the room replied that it may well be true, but he wanted to assure the professor that Jesus' mother Mary, Miriam of Nazareth, was a good Roman Catholic!

No figure, apart from Jesus himself, has *captured* Christian imagination more than Mary of Nazareth. No figure, except the Bishop of Rome, has *divided* Christians more than Mary. Mary has been co-opted in the service of an impossible ideal for Christian women, never more so than in the mediaeval western church. On the other hand she is ignored by others, especially the more protestant a church's theology.

Anglicans, as you would expect, have retained something of both ends of the theological spectrum, finding a middle way between excessive claims and faithless disregard of her.

Now, since 2004 we Anglicans and Roman Catholics have an agreed statement of faith and teaching about Mary as someone whose life shows us a pattern of faith and hope we can learn from and imitate.

There is much we can learn about Mary from the scriptures. Mary is first to hear the good news that the fullness of time has come and God is acting to visit and redeem God's people. She is portrayed as both failing to understand her son, and also as among those believe that he has risen from the dead. She is at the foot of the cross when her son dies. There she is given into the care of John the disciple, and he into hers. This is not a domestic arrangement, but an action which signifies the formation of a new community into which Jesus gives his spirit as he dies. Luke places Mary well and truly in that community of the day of Pentecost seven weeks after the resurrection, when the same Spirit that overshadowed her is now poured out upon all flesh.

To what extend did Mary, the reflective and thoughtful woman immersed in her Jewish world where life and religious practice were of a piece, ever think about another Miriam, sister to the great prophet Moses. I expect she knew her short song of joy on the Red Sea shore at the victory of her people escaping the Egyptian chariots. And perhaps it is that example of spontaneous worship that lies behind Mary's own outburst which draws on Hannah's song over her unexpected but very welcome child, Samuel.

For Christians, Mary is a woman we praise and love, but who more importantly, like Miriam before her, teaches us to praise the God of Israel whom we believe is also the God of *our* joy and hope.

When we grow in love and gratitude to Mary, we grow in trust in the God who chose her to be blessed among woman. Rowan Williams likens her to an older sister from whom we can learn much.

When we think about Mary, we should not be afraid of recognising her special role. Sadly, she's been the focus of a lot of controversy over the centuries. Sometimes her importance has been bizarrely exaggerated, so that others have overreacted and tried to make little of her. At the very least, she is the first person to put her trust in the God who is shown in Jesus. She is at least our elder sister as a believer. And older sisters often have a rather distinctive role in helping younger siblings to grow up and discover things. An older sister who knows her business can make a great deal of difference.

Mary knows her business. By her consent she makes Jesus possible in that place, at that time. And we should not be ashamed of looking to her to hold our hands from time to time as we take the first steps that may make Jesus possible in this place, in this time. It's quite hard to imagine the depth and the level and the cost of what is asked of her by God in Luke's story of the Annunciation; to look at her and meditate on her 'yes' and seek her friendship in prayer is not at all an eccentric or foolish thing for a Christian to do if we want to grow in trust.¹

Mary is our mother in faith, our sister in faith, our companion in faith as we seek to follow the way of her son. She never claims our attention alone, or for herself. She is always directing us to look upon the child she was asked to bear, our Lord and saviour, Jesus, risen Christ. Never be afraid to allow Mary to do so for you and you will share in her readiness to listen for God's invitation to allow your life to grow big with God's promises and her joyful, though, yes, costly, response.

Once you see Mary in this way she will no longer be the embarrassing relative you hope doesn't show up. She will be the welcome companion every time you worship with the communion of saints.

¹ From *Tokens of Trust. An Introduction to Christian Belief* by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. (Canterbury Press, 2007) page 77.