

# *our older sister*

a sermon preached on the

## *feast of mary, mother of our lord*

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at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by fr john stewart*

the lections: Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3; Song of Mary; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2: 1-7

This is such a wonderful festival today that there really isn't anywhere we would rather be, is there? To remember and celebrate the life of Mary, Mother of the Lord, is to discover such treasures, such riches that we all leave so much the better for being here. So come with me on this journey of discovery. And we have as our first guide Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. He says of Mary:

When we think about Mary, we should not be afraid of recognising her special role. Sadly, she has 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. 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.<sup>1</sup>

So, he suggests, Mary is our older sister and she helps us grow up and discover things.

### **1. What might we discover about her life?**

I want to consider the question: What might we discover about her life? And then secondly: What does Mary's story teach us about our lives?

We meet her first in Luke's account of the visit of the angel Gabriel with the message that God is sending his son to become a human like us and Mary is chosen to be his Mother – the means of his human birth, and he is to be named Jesus. We see this young girl – perhaps about 13 years old – not responding with fear but with curiosity and acceptance: "Let it be to me according to your word".

Matthew has this news revealed to Joseph in a dream, not to Mary (Matthew 1.18-23).

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An introduction to Christian Belief*, Canterbury Press 2001, p.77

Mark has no mention of this story at all – he begins his gospel with the adult Jesus commencing his public ministry.

John goes back to the beginning of time to see the origins of this message. “In the beginning was Christ and Christ was with God and Christ was God. And Christ became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory” (John 1.1, 14). John never uses Mary’s name but always refers to her as ‘the mother of Jesus’.

Mary went to visit Elizabeth during her pregnancy – perhaps to remove herself from the likelihood of being stoned to death as the law required of a single unmarried pregnant woman. She greets Elizabeth with what we call now The Magnificat/Song of Mary. She offers a very positive view of the future – at a time when the present was very bleak.

Matthew and Luke both have the couple travel to Bethlehem where Jesus is born in very humble circumstances. Mary remains silent holding her experience in her heart. All the way through she is pondering and reflecting on what she is experiencing.

When Jesus is 12 they go to the Jerusalem temple to celebrate the Passover. On setting out to return home they discover Jesus is not with them. They go back and find him in discussion with the temple teachers. His words to his distressed parents sound harsh to our ears: “did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” From this point Luke makes it clear that Mary is watching Jesus grow and develop and again she ponders and reflects on it all, treasuring things in her heart.

Later she attends a wedding in Cana of Galilee and his words to her sound harsh again to our ears. She tells him they are very embarrassed because they have run out of wine and he says, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me?”

She seems always to be able to welcome each new experience and isn’t too hasty to act on it or judge it. Ponder and reflect. We also see her stickability/stability. She turns up, she accompanies Jesus all the way along. As the going gets tougher she seems to get stronger. Until she and several women friends find the strength to stand at the foot of the cross as Jesus’ physical life ends – and she is still pondering and reflecting on the deepest meaning of what she sees.

Then there is an astonishing omission from all the texts – there is no mention of the risen Christ appearing to her. Matthew has him appearing to the disciples in Galilee, Luke has the appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and then the group in the upper room, John has his appearance to Mary Magdalene in the garden and then four other appearances. Mark only reports the discovery of the empty tomb but no one sees the risen Christ.

I suspect there is no report of the risen Christ and his mother because it would have been such a poignant, intimate meeting. She has trusted that his promise to be raised from the dead on the third day would happen and now it has and here he is ushering in a whole new way of thinking about living and dying. And it is not a reunion which anyone else witnessed. There are no budding gospel writers with their notebooks, no paparazzi, no media of any kind. The future life she foretold at the time of her pregnancy is now accomplished in her, in the others and in all creation. Her YES to receiving the life of the Son of God in her womb at the beginning and Jesus’ YES in handing his spirit over to God at the end of his earthly life achieved what C.S. Lewis called “reversing the fly-wheel of human history”.

The last we hear of her is again from Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. After the Ascension of the Risen Christ she is mentioned by name as being present with the others waiting in prayer for the outpouring of the Spirit at the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost.

## **2. What does Mary’s story teach us about our lives?**

How do we behave when we find ourselves challenged by something new, scary, threatening? This parish community is working very intentionally to embody the disposition of Christ and invites all members to opt in. Most people have, some have reservations, others are opposed. Mary waits

silently, pondering and reflecting in her heart – trusting God’s action will be accomplished in her and she doesn’t need to control it or even understand it.

How do we respond to the call of God – to those moments when God’s Spirit is nudging or urging or beckoning us onward? Mary’s response is the grace-filled response each of us is called to make to God. Let it be to my according to your word. Have you said that to God lately?

How do you approach worship here week by week? Is it a habit, a duty, or a joy? Mary celebrates God’s saving work in song when she greets Elizabeth. We sang that song ourselves just now in the place of the Psalm. It gives us the words of our daily prayer really.

How do you go when the going gets tough? Illness, grief, horror at what’s happening in the world, and so on. Mary hears the elderly Simeon and Anna greet her new baby as the Saviour of the world – the one generations have longed for – and also their word of warning: “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2.34-35). Tough and challenging times are part of human life and experience – how we live in those times and receive the gifts they give us and the changes they work in us is our life’s work. Or we can resist, oppose and become embittered and depressed victims.

How do you sense yourself growing and maturing in the likeness of Christ? Mary starts off as his mother and Jesus is part of her family. But after his first miracle she becomes a follower, a disciple. She listens and watches and grows in wisdom and grace. As the church continued to reflect on these things Mary became *theotokos* – she who bore God, or *Mother of God* as we say these days. As such she shares the glory of God’s kingdom and has a unique place among God’s people.

*The scriptural witness summons all believers in every generation to call Mary 'blessed'; this Jewish woman of humble status, this daughter of Israel living in hope of justice for the poor, whom God has graced and chosen to become the virgin mother of his Son through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. We are to bless her as the 'handmaid of the Lord' who gave her unqualified assent to the fulfilment of God's saving plan, as the mother who pondered all things in her heart, as the refugee seeking asylum in a foreign land, as the mother pierced by the innocent suffering of her own child, and as the woman to whom Jesus entrusted his friends. We are at one with her and the apostles, as they pray for the outpouring of the Spirit upon the nascent Church, the eschatological family of Christ. And we may even glimpse in her the final destiny of God's people to share in her son's victory over the powers of evil and death.*

*ARCIC Mary Grace and Hope in Christ section 30.*