

SUNDAY 16 AUGUST 2020 – The Blessed Virgin Mary

Readings

Galatians 4.4-7

Luke 1.46-55

Transcript of the sermon given by Revd Peter Wintgens

Today we are celebrating one of the holy days dedicated to Mary, in this church which is dedicated to her. But for many Christians, including many Anglicans, Mary – and the reverence given to her – can be a bit of a problem. Did she really exist? Was she really a virgin when Jesus was born? Should we pray to her? And what, if anything, does she have to say to us 21st century Christians today? The Virgin Mary – The Blessed Virgin Mary – Mother of God – Queen of Heaven – Theotokos Godbearer: are some of the titles given to Mary over the centuries. How can this perfection of sacred motherhood and submissive holiness have any genuine connection with us, human sinners that we are? Roman Catholics have a long and valued tradition of venerating Mary; Eastern Orthodox Christians don't usually worry about analysing it all and mostly say that she is who she is – God's mother; large numbers of Free Church and Protestant congregations may not be happy with some of the more elaborate worship surrounding Mary; and some conservative fundamentalists say that whatever's in the Bible is literally true. But then there's the Anglicans, especially those of a liberal tradition. We don't have a central authority which says what we need to believe, or take a congregational vote on matters of faith and belief. Most of us think about things. And then argue about them, of course. Why can't we emulate our Roman Catholic friends in just accepting that she was the Mother of God, physical virginity is a given, as well as all the theological development which has accumulated around Mary over the centuries? If there's a problem, maybe it's in the expectation of unquestioning obedience to the whole package.

The more you read the Bible the more you realise that it's frequently not about what it says, but what it means. And what Mary means is far more important than the arguments about the very sketchy picture we get of her from Scripture; where she gets less press in the Gospels than Mary Magdalene, only the barest mention in Acts and surprisingly nothing at all in the rest of the New Testament – apart from her being “the woman” of whom Jesus was born. Most of the theological layers about Mary come from later on in the Church's history.

Just like Jesus she was an actual historical person whether or not she was called Mary, Maryam, Miriam or whatever variation there is on Mary. I suppose God could have taken the eternal Word and introduced it into the world without any messy business of giving birth or managing a rebellious teenager. I prefer to think of God as working with the natural processes of the world and truly wanting to share all of our humanity, including the messy bits, instead of just intervening every now and then. So part of the meaning of Mary is that Jesus had to have a real human mother like all the rest of us in order to be born into full humanity. Otherwise he has no connection with us. Without the human part of him we could, of course, worship Jesus as a god. But without the “fully God and fully human” combination he can't really be our bridge and pathway to God.

And was Mary a “virgin”? Here we come to something more tricky. It probably depends on what you mean by “virgin”. St. Paul, the earliest Christian writer, says nothing about Mary by name, and nothing about her being a virgin. It simply doesn't matter to him, only that Jesus was “born of a woman, under the Law.” The Matthew and Luke gospels where we find Mary described as a “virgin” were based on the Greek translation of the Hebrew

Scriptures which don't say "virgin", they say "young woman". Some commentaries talk about virginity being a code word for something else: more to do with what Mary means to us. Someone untouched - possibly in the sense of not having had sexual intercourse but more in the idea of being someone undamaged by the world, without baggage, someone who was open to accept what God was asking of her without setting conditions or limits.

That's not to say that she's a doormat - not at all. In the annunciation story, the angel turns up out of nowhere, without warning, and says to her "Hallo there, guess what? I'm here to tell you that you're going to be a mum and have a child which will be from God." And what does she say at first? Not what you might expect of a dutiful submissive young woman of that time but rather the equivalent of "You can't be serious... I've never been in bed with anyone and don't have a husband. Please explain..." Eventually of course she does say "Alright then, as you wish, I'll go along with it and God will just have to sort things out." And that's another key to unlocking Mary's meaning - aligning ourselves with God's will, trying to understand it and then work with it; not necessarily blind acceptance, but in the assurance that whatever decision we come to, it's the one we believe is what God wants. Mary's answer to the angel "Let it be with me according to your word" before the birth of Jesus has its ultimate counterpart in Jesus saying "Not my will but yours be done" before his death on the cross.

Should we pray to her? There is room for confusion in that some Christians seem to consider her as important as Jesus. Why on earth do people pray to her picture, or a statue, and set lighted candles in front of it!? Isn't that idolatry? Well...as you sit, or stand, or kneel by the Virgin and Child images in churches you aren't really praying to the "picture" or the "statue". They're intended to be devotional aids to help focus your prayer, quite rightly, on God. But you might bring Mary into the prayer by asking for her help in understanding God's purposes; after all, she shows us a trusting response to God's call. So we come to perhaps the most important question on this, her special day in this church with her name: What can Mary possibly have to say to us Christians today? And there are lots of answers to that, especially among Anglicans.

But one possible answer is this: Look at icons of Mary. They are often placed by a candle stand and yes, people do put lighted candles in front of it and pray in front of it. Look at Mary's face. It's sometimes turned towards us - but more often looking adoringly at Jesus, as she does in this church, both in the east window and in the tableau in the prayer room. She invites, almost challenges us to come with her into the mystery of God. With her hand she's holding Jesus, showing, offering the divine-and-human Jesus to us, saying (rather like John the Baptist) "Here is the real One, I'm not the goal, you must look past me and towards Christ." In a more contemporary style she might also be saying, "No, I didn't understand it either, but here's the reality. I trusted, let me help you." Even if one isn't a mother we can all respond to both of these invitations.

And look at what Mary has to say even before Jesus is born, the words she says when visiting her cousin Elizabeth, recorded in this morning's Gospel reading, which show the depth of her trust in God and her conviction that the poor and lowly and hungry are the reason she is now carrying his child.

Mary then becomes for both women and men a prayer friend and companion, instead of a detached remote figure, lacking anything in common with real humans. Someone who accepted, waited, watched, suffered and lived with God's promise that it all meant something even if she didn't know exactly what. The arguments surrounding Mary recede into the background, and Mary can mean for us something timeless; of connecting with God, however we understand it. And then the classic Mary prayer, repeated endlessly every day by so many people, becomes something very special:

Hail Mary, full of grace,

Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

PBW – 11.8.2020