

MOTHERS' DAY 1983

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 1:26-38

INTRODUCTION

“Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus...”

There must surely be a varied reaction to those words. For many of us are not attuned to such an affirmation of praise. We have become biased by negative attitudes which have been passed down through our life time. We have been critical of others in the thought and expression of their Christian Faith – because it differs from ours. We have not allowed ourselves a stretching of the mind that comes with tolerance.

Ah – it is sad to think that Mary the mother of our Lord, has been the sign of division among Christians, when you know, surely that Mary belongs to us all...All Christian traditions accept the stirring picture in the Book of Hebrews – of the Church – moving in faith – surrounded y a great cloud of witnesses.

We find a vital place in the expression of our faith – for the Saints – Prophets – the Apostles and Martyrs and faithful servants of the Lord – but the Virgin Mother has become the point of division.

Max Thurian is a distinguished Protestant Theologian who says:- “Instead of being a cause of division amongst us, Christian reflection on the role of Mary should be a cause of rejoicing and a source of prayer...It is both theologically essential, and spiritually profitable to consider the vocation of Mary, with some freedom”.

So it was that Pope Paul VI, made possible this freedom when at the Vatican Council of 1964, he afforded the title to Mary of, “Mother of the Church” – and how true.

And – John Macquarie, whom I studied for two years; a Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, says of this title:- “Roman Catholics, Orthodox Anglicans and Protestants can agree. For what we see in Mary we ought to see in the Church”; and might I add – ‘In ourselves’.

Now, what is there in the role of Mary that is important to the Church and ourselves? The Gospel writers, Matthew, Luke, and John don’t have a great deal to say about her; much less, Mark; but what they do say is of great importance to us all.

(1) ST.LUKE’S GOSPEL

No doubt, the simple message of St. Luke’s account of Mary and the birth of Jesus, deeply touches the feelings and the imagination of every Christian. His written text contains, primarily what he wished to convey. And it is clear that he places a great deal of importance on the part that Mary played, in his version of the Good News.

And I have no doubt that this comes from his familiarity with the Old Testament writings for the mood of these old records, show out in his text. Why, in his parallel account of Elizabeth and Mary,

and the annunciation of John's birth, and that of Jesus, there is quite a contrast with these episodes that punctuate the account of Samuel's life.

But more important still, this presentation of Mary; is influenced by the prophets. For you see, it had long been the cry of the Prophets that God would deliver Israel, by raising up a Saviour from their very midst – within the nation. Zechariah writes (2:19; 9:9) “Sing, rejoice, daughter of Zion, for I am coming to live among you”. And Isaiah writes (7:14), “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: A virgin will conceive and give birth to a Son, and will call Him Emanuel (which means God with us)”.

Every Jewish bride – secretly hoped that her first born child, would be the Messiah – the promised Saviour. But He didn't come – until now, in New Testament times.

Luke has an angel coming to Mary, saying:- “You will conceive, in your womb, and bear a Son and shall call His name Jesus (Saviour)”. Mary, like the Daughter of Zion is bidden not to fear for she had found favour with God.

I know there are those who accept the simplicity of this beautiful narrative of Mary – but there are those who ask; “How do you know it happened”. In interpreting a Jewish story, the first question of importance is NOT, “Did this actually happen?” but “What does it teach?”.

(2) MARY'S ROLE

The first thing I see in Luke's presentation of Mary's role is – the initiative of God in meeting our need – He comes to us! We are not left to handle our human situation alone. The second thing I notice, is that what happens in Mary's life is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In the beginning of time, God's spirit was active in creation. It is His Spirit that moved upon the face of the waters. It was His Spirit that breathed life into man. Now, here at the annunciation, God's creative Spirit is about to continue His work, that would have far reaching effects – and Mary was responsive to this action of God in His creative work, She said “Yes”, to God; I will allow it to happen.

Something that the Church needs to remember – and we – as individuals need to remember, in responding to God – it is HIS work – not ours. And we need to respond in faith, for in the seeming impossibilities of life – God is at work – recreating relationships that have broken down – recreating gifts that have lost their usefulness – recreating lives that have been ruined. He is raising the standard all the time.

Mary gave birth to a Son – Jesus Christ – our Saviour. It was Christ who raised the standard of women – it was Christ who gave dignity to ordinary people – so we ought to take a second look at ourselves. Too many of us see ourself in terms of age – or family background – or occupation – or education.

But beyond the self that we see – that the world sees – is the true self that God sees. The self that bears His divine image – that is made after His likeness. And every child that is born into the world – bears that inner image. Oh how valuable our life is.

You need to lift your thoughts about yourself. You need to raise your vision. And see yourself as God sees you – and let the real person unfold. And – believe me – in the unfoldment of your spiritual potential – the step of identification is at a point beyond just loving God and loving good –

it is that place where we feel ourselves as part of God. And what this means to you and me, is more clearly laid out in what John, the writer of the fourth Gospel has to say about Mary.

(3) THE MARY OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

It is very significant, that Mary played a part, not merely in the birth of Jesus Christ, but in His ongoing work. And it is in this, that John mentions Mary – but in the most unusual way!

There was a wedding feast at Cana in Galilee – and there was no wine – quite an embarrassing situation – so Mary, Jesus' mother came to Him and said, "They have no wine". At this, Jesus replied:- "WOMAN, what have I to do with you?".

Now, this title which Jesus gives here to Mary, may seem most unusual – until He gives it to her again in her station at the cross – where it suddenly bursts open – full of meaning.

As Jesus hung on the cross – Mary looked up at His torn and sorrow stricken body – and Jesus gazed down at her pitiful eyes. The beloved disciple is beside her. And Jesus said something... "WOMAN, behold your son". Why didn't He call her mother – for He said to the beloved disciple, "Behold your mother...and from that hour the disciple took her to his own home". In addressing Mary as WOMAN – He is addressing womanhood – a vital message the Church needs to lay hold of – "Woman – behold your son".

These words are spoken in a scene which reminds us that we cannot escape the brutality – the fatality – and the futility of life. It is with us – every day; – to cope with life we need one another!

One day Jesus was teaching in a home, when His mother and His brothers came and stood outside. Someone told Jesus they were there...But He replied, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" Then He looked at those around Him and said "Here are My mother and My brothers! – whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12: 46-50)

In this, Jesus is saying to the Church – "Go forth into the world, womanhood, manhood – and care for one another, be burden lifters – take with you this new dimension of life – for God incarnates Himself in and through you".

I went to a lady in a psychiatric ward one day, and she said, "I am glad you have come – when you come here, you put me in touch with God". You see, she was able to look beyond me, and identify with the incarnate Christ who works through YOU and ME when we go out into the world – conscious of the dignity and grace in our womanhood or manhood. – That is what the role of Mary teaches us – but our life is kept by the Holy Spirit.

It is only through grief that you and I are able to help another in their grief. It is only through failure, that we are able to help another who has failed – It is only through hurt, that we are able to help another who is hurt.

But through our giving, and through our living, is a Divine love that will not let His people go.