

MARY: POINTING THE WAY TO JESUS

FATHER STANTON

In the 19th century, a priest called Father Stanton was the Vicar of the notoriously high church of St Alban the Martyr in Holborn. By contrast, the Archdeacon was very low church and he undertook a visitation of St Albans. As they were going round the church, they reached the statue of Mary and Jesus, which had many votive candles lit in front of it, and the Archdeacon turned to the Vicar and said:

'Mr Stanton, what is this – a penny for a prayer?'

Father Stanton replied, *'And if you give her a sovereign – she'll give you a wink!'*

Father Stanton also liked to tell another story, about the statue of Mary and the infant Christ that still stands over the north door of Westminster Abbey:

'Soon after it had been put in place, a somewhat militant Protestant Society, complained to the authorities that it was obvious they were making more of the Mother than the Child. The Dean and Chapter asked a deputation to justify this statement, and the leader said that there was no doubt about it, for the mother was so much bigger than the child ... '

These stories, illustrate some of the unease that some Christians have about Mary. At the root of that, is perhaps a lack of certainty about how in some situations the Mother of Christ actually relates to her Son. It's those times when in art, music, liturgy and language, we can no longer put our finger on exactly what Mary has to do with Jesus anymore – which is not to say it isn't there – but perhaps its been obscured or is less clear that it might be.

As Christians we have to take seriously the words of Scripture when, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary says *'from now on, all generations will call me blessed'*. After all, in the Creed, there are only two other people mentioned by name other than Jesus -

Pilate – the person who sent Jesus to his death.

And Mary – the person who brought him to birth.

BORN OF A WOMAN

It's often said that there is not a huge amount about Mary in the New Testament, and that's true in terms of the number of words, but every verse about her does seem to be highly significant.

We must remember that Jesus' mother was not a product of pious imagination, but was in fact, a real flesh-and-blood person.

We see this in St Paul's letter to the Galatians where Mary is not even named – perhaps Paul didn't even know her name – but the importance of the '*woman*' he mentions is that it is an *historical remark*. Written in about 50AD, it is almost certainly the earliest mention of Mary and yet it is also one of the most significant. He places Mary in context of time and history as part of a people and culture and religion, and it is this context that Jesus also shares. It is because of Mary that Jesus is born '*in the fullness of time*' and '*under the Law*'.

Jesus stands in solidarity with all human beings because of his humanity, which he gets from his mother, and it is this humanity that he redeems. For Paul, it is this incarnational fact, that is far more important than the virginal conception that he never mentions.

IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME

And this birth from a woman takes place '*in the fullness of time*'. In other words, it is all part of God's plan, and Mary is necessarily an important part of that. Jesus' coming was not accidental or random, it was part of something very deliberate and part of God's providential unfolding of salvation over the long course of history. In that sense Mary was '*necessary*' to our Salvation. Not in any way as the cause or agent of it, but she was an instrument of divine will and purpose.

So often God works in our lives when we don't know or perceive it, and it is only afterwards when we look back that we realise or understand that God was taking the long view and preparing us so that '*in the fullness of time*' the right thing would happen at the right time.

Even though Paul does not say very much about Mary, by putting her in historical context, he is telling us that her life is a pivotal point in salvation history, the end of one era, and the beginning of another.

MAGNIFICAT

Mary is important in another way too.

Her famous hymn of praise known as the Magnificat from its opening line in Latin: *'My soul doth magnify the Lord'*, is a foretaste of Jesus' own teaching in the Beatitudes;

The hungry are filled with plenty.

The mighty are thrown down

The humble are exalted

The poor find favour

And the rich are sent empty away.

Mary herself, a humble slip of a girl from a backwater town, is the embodiment of all that this reversal of values entails. To honour Mary, is to express the radical nature of the Christian faith that overturns the injustice and oppression of history and human society, to find a new direction in accordance with the will of a loving and gracious God.

If in Galatians, Paul looks *backwards* to see how Mary was a product of the past, in Luke's Gospel she is a figure pointing to the *future*, to what Jesus brings and what he will do. In eastern iconography, one of the commonest depiction of Mary is known as the Virgin 'Hodegetria' which means *'she who points the way'*. In icons of this kind, Mary is literally pointing to Jesus.

In this kind of art, Mary is almost never shown *separately* from Jesus. She is always in relationship with him, and showing us how to be in relationship with him too. This is what Rowan Williams says about the Virgin Hodegetria:

'Mary is who she is by pointing away from herself. Her identity is caught up in leading us to Jesus ... she looks at us, urging us by her gesture not to keep our eyes on her face, but to follow the hand that points to Jesus'.

In the Magnificat, Mary points us to Jesus. Up this point in history, wealth, power, privilege and position have been the things that human beings have sought and which their religions have encouraged them to seek. If humility, compassion, equality, love and gentleness seem to us self-evidently good things, it is only because of the Christian faith that this is so. They were certainly not considered good in Greek and Roman religion which, by and large, existed on a very different ethical basis. Mary of the Magnificat inaugurates the ethical and social teaching that Our Lord would expound more fully throughout his ministry, and in the example of his life, death and resurrection.

ST MARY'S BARNES

But what does Mary have to say to this church dedicated in her honour?

More churches have the dedication of St Mary than any other.

And I think there is a good reason for that.

Mary is the person whose willingness to serve, makes God *present* in the world through the person of Jesus Christ.

This church is situated on a busy high street, in the midst of busy city and it stands as a sign of God's presence here in the world.

It has done that for hundred and hundreds of years, and it continues to do so, and this is needed even more in a world where just a few miles away someone leaves a bomb on a tube train causing people to flee in panic for their lives.

It is this world, that Christ came to redeem,

and it is this world that Mary saw being transformed by the loving purposes of God for whom nothing is impossible.

Every time you gather here for worship, you come in order to make Christ present in your hearts and minds, so that you can then go out into the world to make him present to others who need to meet him.

As Mary brought Christ to birth in the world, so each individual Christian shares Mary's vocation to bring Christ to birth in their lives and in the lives of others.

May this church and every Christian embrace that vocation, giving thanks to Mary, the Mother of Christ, who always points us to her Son.