

LEARNING FROM MARY

**JESUS SAID: 'MY MOTHER AND MY BROTHERS
ARE THOSE WHO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD AND
DO IT' (LUKE 8. 21)**

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MARIOLATRY – AND WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY TEACHES ABOUT MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS.

The churches today and throughout history teach many different things about Mary. How did these teachings originate and what is their basis? Most importantly what do the Holy Scriptures teach?

This paper sets out some of the views about Mary current today and then asks what we can learn from Mary and from her place in the saving purposes of God.

MARY AS MOTHER OF GOD (THEOTOKOS)

During the early years of the Church, Mary was not worshipped as she is today in the Roman Catholic Church. There is little or no mention of her by the early Church Fathers (probably because there is relatively little mention of her in Scripture). With the gradual veneration of the martyrs, Mary was also given special honour because of her motherhood of Christ, she was thus accorded the title of hyperdulia ('great service'- the highest degree of veneration) as opposed to mere dulia ('service') which belongs to all saints and angels. From Origen onwards the Greek title *theotokos* was applied to the Virgin Mary, the title meaning God-bearer. This was rejected by Nestorius (who believed in two completely distinct persons in Christ) but the title was formerly upheld at the Council of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). The Latin equivalent of *theotokos* is *Deipara*, but it was normally translated *Dei Genitrix* which has the rather different meaning 'Mother of God.' The title 'Mother of God' implies that she shares in Christ's Divine nature and that she existed before God. In consequence, Mary has been exalted and has become an object of worship. According to the Roman Catholic Catechism "*Mary is truly 'Mother of God'*" (para 495).

Also around the time of the Council of Ephesus, the 4th Century apocryphal writing *Transitus Maria* (the journeying over of Mary)

added further weight to the growing veneration of the Virgin Mary. This writing describes how Mary after the crucifixion, was attended to by virgins, given the elaborate title ‘Mistress of the World’, was able to perform miracles and promise to answer the prayers of all who commemorate her. Like the Greek goddess Artimas she is to be prayed to, to ensure fruitful crops. Mary is worshipped by Angels, intercedes for the saints and is accorded the title ‘Queen of Heaven’. Significantly the *Transitus Maria* was placed on the list of prohibited books by the Pope in 500AD. It did not take long for these teachings to be incorporated into the Roman Catholic Church.

THE PERPETUAL VIRGINITY

The Roman Catholic Church also teaches that Mary was a perpetual virgin i.e that Mary lived out her whole life as a virgin and died a virgin. This teaching was put forward in the 4th century by Jerome and was also held by Origen. In paragraph 499 of the Roman Catholic Catechism Mary is celebrated as *Aeiparthenos* (‘Ever-virgin’), only having given birth to Jesus. Catechism 500 deals with the mention of Jesus’ brothers and sisters in the Bible: “*Against this doctrine the objection is sometimes raised that the Bible mentions brothers and sisters of Jesus. The Church has always understood these passages as not referring to other children of the Virgin Mary. In fact James and Joseph, ‘brothers of Jesus’, are the sons of another Mary, a disciple of Christ, whom St Matthew significantly calls ‘the other Mary’*”. However, Scripture is clear that Mary was only a Virgin up until Christ’s birth, but not after. Matthew 1:25 reads, ‘*and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son.*’ The word *till* in this sentence implies that after the birth of Jesus they had a normal marriage relationship. Several times in the New Testament Jesus’ mother and brothers are mentioned together, for example in Luke 8 v19 ‘*Now Jesus’ mother and brothers came to see him*’ they are also mentioned in Matthew chapter 12 v46 and Mark chapter 3 v31. The early Christians did not believe Mary remained a virgin. In John Chrysostom’s homilies (4th Century) Mary is given no undue veneration and Jesus’ brothers are spoken of as matter of fact:

‘For while he yet talked to the people, it is said, “one told him, thy mother and thy brethren seek thee. But he saith, who is my mother, and who are my brethren?” And this he said, not as being ashamed of His mother, nor denying her that bare him; for if he had been ashamed of her, he would not have passed through that womb; but as declaring that she hath no advantage from this, unless she do all that is required to be done. For in fact that which she had essayed to do, was of superfluous vanity; in that she wanted to show the people that she hath power and authority over her Son, imagining not as yet anything great concerning him; whence also her unseasonable approach. See at all events both her self- confidence and theirs (Jesus’ brothers). Since when they ought to have gone in, and listened with the multitude; or if they were not so minded, to have waited for his bringing his discourse to an end, and then to have come near; they call him out, and do this before all, evincing a superfluous vanity, and wishing to make it appear, that with much authority they enjoin him. And this too the evangelist shows that he is blaming, for with this very allusion did he thus express himself, “While he yet talked to the people;” as if he should say, What? Was there no other opportunity? Why, was it not possible to speak with him in private?’

The attitude of John Chrysostom toward Mary was the one portrayed in Scripture, that she was the mother of Jesus, that she has no advantage of being Jesus’ mother in that she still needed to listen to him and respect him as God and receive salvation by him. Also the way Jesus spoke to his mother seems almost disrespectful, *‘who is my mother?’*

The whole idea of Mary’s perpetual virginity seems to be based on perverse logic. Firstly, some writers assert that unless Mary had remained a virgin her offspring could not have been divine, since the birth would have lost something of its mystery. Secondly, Bernard of Clairvaux claimed that the virgins in Revelation 14 v4, must include Mary and therefore she must have remained a virgin throughout her life. Any honest reading of this passage clearly reveals the virgins as men. This error has compounded itself by exalting virginity far

beyond what is taught in Scripture and has led to an unhealthy attitude to the status of marriage.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Another Roman Catholic teaching regarding the Virgin Mary is the Dogma of the immaculate conception, i.e. Mary was immaculately conceived without sin. [Such a dogma is a statement by the Roman Catholic Church which is claimed to be revealed truth either by Scripture or tradition, defined by the Magisterium and required for faith, It is a sin (heresy) to disbelieve it]. Many Roman Catholics think that the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception refers to Jesus' conception, but in fact it applies to Mary herself. This theory had taken many centuries to develop and to be accepted by the Roman Catholic Church. It was declared an open question by Pope Sixtus the 4th in 1485 and by the Council of Trent in 1546. It was propagated in the Apostolic Constitution issued by Pope Pius IX on December 8th 1854:

'We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.'

This teaching is contrary to scripture. In Luke ch1 v46-56 (Mary's Song) Mary humbles herself and states her need for God as Saviour. *'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour, for He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant'*. Romans ch3 v23 states that *'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'* this includes Mary as well.

THE ASSUMPTION OF MARY

The Roman Catholic Dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary states that she was taken up into heaven bodily shortly after her death, once in heaven she is given special honour and mediatory roles, and ascribed as Queen of Heaven. As with other Marian beliefs not found

in Scripture, this teaching took many centuries to develop, and was only finally accepted as dogma by the Roman Catholic Church in 1950.

For the first few centuries of the Church's existence there is no mention at all of the death of Mary. The first reference to it is by Epiphanius in 377 A.D. and he states that 'her end no one knows'. From the early church writers (such as Jerome) there seems to be no evidence at all of a tradition surrounding the circumstances of Mary's death, there was certainly nothing mentioned concerning the assumption. Isidore of Seville, in the 7th Century ratified Epiphanius and Jerome in claiming that no one knew of Mary's end.(1)

Gregory of Tours in 590 A.D. was the first Church Father to categorically affirm the assumption of Mary because of his acceptance of the apocryphal writing the *Transitus Beatae Mariae* (the journeying over of Mary) which was circulated in the 5th century. This writing describes how Mary after the crucifixion was attended to by virgins and given the elaborate title 'Mistress of the World', was able to perform miracles and promise to answer the prayers of all who commemorate her. Like the Greek goddess Artemis she is to be prayed to for bountiful crops. Mary is worshipped by Angels and intercedes for the saints and is accorded the title 'Queen of Heaven'.

During the 5th Century the *Transitus Beatae Mariae* was condemned by the early Church as heresy. In 495 Pope Gelasius issued a decree entitled *Decretum de Libris Canonicis Ecclesiasticis et Apocryphis* (Decree of Canonical and Apocryphal writings). This officially set apart the texts which were considered to be canonical and those which were apocryphal and therefore to be rejected. It also condemned those who write and circulate heretical works:

'These and [writings] similar to these, which...all the heresiarchs and their disciples, or the schismatics have taught or written...we confess have not only been rejected but also banished from the whole Roman and Apostolic Church and with their authors and followers of their authors have been condemned forever under the indissoluble bond of anathema.'

In the list of apocryphal works the *Transitus Beatae Mariae* is listed. The decree issued by Pope Gelasius was also endorsed and upheld by Pope Hormisdas in the 6th century. However, such stringent measures were unable to contain the spread of this heresy and by the 7th and beginning of the 8th centuries this heretical writing had gained a foothold in the imaginations of many teachers and lay folk throughout the Christian world.

It was not until 1st November 1950 that the Assumption of Mary was finally accepted as Dogma by the Roman Catholic Church by Pope Pius XII, in his *Munificentissimus Deus*: '*We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.*' Pope Pius XII also spoke of Mary as having been enthroned Queen of Heaven. At St Peter's Square on Easter Day 1988, Pope John Paul II's message included a prayer '*to the Queen of Heaven for protection and peace in the world.*' According to Papal Encyclical 1897, '*As no man goes to the Father except by the Son, so no man goes to the Son except by His Mother.*' Roman Catholic Catechism paragraph 966 reads: '*Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death.*'

However there is no mention in the New Testament of the events concerning Mary's death, nor any mention of Mary rising from the dead and ascending into heaven as Queen. Mary was also a sinful fallible human being. She accepted and rejoiced in her need for Christ as her Saviour (Luke ch 1 v47). She is like every other Christian, a sinner saved by Grace. She died in faith and is now with Christ. Her body will be raised at Christ's second coming, along with every other believer. Conversely the Old Testament predicted of Christ that he would suffer and ascend into heaven. In the New Testament Christ's death, resurrection and assumption are witnessed by his disciples and written down in the Bible as God's Word. There are no references to

Mary as Queen of Heaven in Scripture either. The only reference in the Bible to the Queen of Heaven is the Canaanite pagan goddess to whom the Israelites burned incense, made cakes and poured out drink offerings and who was detestable and wicked in the eyes of the Lord (Jeremiah 44: 17-25, 7:18). To say that Mary rose from the dead and was taken into Heaven as Queen is to accord her similar status as Christ, and ultimately to denigrate Christ.

MARY AS MEDIATRIX AND REDEMPTRIX

Once ascended bodily into heaven Mary is believed to carry out a number of roles. These consist mainly of acting as an intercessor or mediator (Mediatrice) between God and man and playing a role in mankind's salvation (Co-Redemptrice).

The teaching of Mary's mediatory and redemptory roles in heaven can be traced back to an early date. St. Antonius (250-350) claimed: "*All graces that have ever been bestowed on men, all came through Mary.*" St. Bernard (1090-1153) wrote "[*Mary is called*] *the gate of heaven, because no one can enter that blessed kingdom without passing through her.*" In the widely read book (still published today) *The Glories of Mary*, Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1787) describes how Mary is given half of God's kingdom to rule. Mary is considered a source of salvation and a mediator between God and man. He also claims that outside of Mary there is no salvation. She rules jointly with Christ and is to be served, worshipped and given devotion to by men.

Alphonsus de Liguori and his unbiblical teachings have been embraced by the Roman Catholic Church to such an extent that he was declared to be a doctor of the Church, canonized as a saint and his book endorsed and reproduced (even today). Notice the similar impact *The Glories of Mary* had with the *Transitus Mariae* in that just one unscriptural writing could be accepted and taught as truth.

Alphonsus de Liguori's work has subsequently been endorsed and promulgated further by the Pope's and authorities within the Roman Catholic Church. Benedict XV declared: "*she herself may justly be said to have redeemed together with Christ the human race.*"

According to Leo XIII: *'When Mary offered herself completely to God together with her Son in the temple, she was already sharing with him the painful atonement on behalf of the human race...(at the foot of the cross) she was a co-worker with Christ in His expiation for mankind and she offered up her Son to the divine justice dying with him in her heart.'* Pius IX adds: *'With her Son, the Only-begotten, she is the most powerful Mediatrix and Conciliatrix of the whole world.'*

In 1935 Pope Pius XI gave the title co-redemptrix to Mary during a radio broadcast. Pope John Paul in his 'Holy Thursday' address of 1979 urged bishops and priests to look to Mary: *'You must look to her with exceptional hope and love.'* *'Who will better communicate to you the truth about him [Christ] than his mother?'* *'May the Virgin of Pentecost obtain this for us through her intercession.'* This is just a tiny fraction of so much that has been declared and promoted by leading authorities in the Roman Catholic Church in the growing veneration of Mary as Mediatrix and co-redemptrix.

These teachings became officially incorporated into the Roman Catholic Church in the *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council, 21st November 1964. Thus Roman Catholic Catechism 966 states:

'You conceived the living God and, by your prayers, will deliver our souls from death.' Para 968: *'Her role in relation to the Church and to all humanity goes still further. In a wholly singular way she co-operated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the Saviour's work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace.'* Para 969: *'This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfilment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.'*

This is the official stance of the Roman Catholic Church on Mary's role as *mediatrix* and *co-redemptrix*.

AN INFALLIBLE STATEMENT

Not only this but the growing exaltation and worship of Mary seems to show no signs of abating. Although Mary has been referred to on numerous occasions as *co-redemptrix*, *mediatrix*, and advocate, none have the force of an infallible papal declaration. This may yet happen though. Professor Mark Miravalle of Franciscan University in Steubenville, OH, initiated a formal petition in 1993 during a Marian conference at the university. It asks the Pope to make an infallible statement that would officially elevate Mary to the status of co-redeemer. More than six million people from nearly 150 countries had signed the petition which reached the Vatican by the year 2000, asking Pope John Paul II infallibly to declare a new dogma:

“That the Virgin Mary is co-redeemer with Jesus and co-operates fully with her son in the redemption of humanity.” If this were done, *“she would be a vastly more powerful figure, something close to the fourth member of the Holy Trinity and the primary female face through which Christians experience the divine.”*

If the dogma were declared infallibly, it would pronounce (and consequently all Roman Catholics would have to believe) that Mary would be *“Co-Redemptrix* [co-redeemer], *Mediatrix* [mediator] of All Graces, and Advocate for the people of God.

CONTRARY TO SCRIPTURE

Scripture asserts that the redemptive and mediatory roles are Christ's alone, he alone is the mediator and redeemer of sinful man. For example 1 Timothy ch 2 v 5: *‘For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.’* Hebrews ch 9 v 15: *‘He is the Mediator of the New Covenant, by means of death.’* Romans ch 3 v 24-25: *‘Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood.’* Or Ephesians ch 1 v 7: *‘In Him we have*

redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.’ And Colossians ch 1 v 14: *‘In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins’*. Acts ch 4 v12: *‘Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.’*

MARY WORSHIP OUTSIDE THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

It must also be mentioned that worship of the Virgin Mary is not only confined to the Roman Catholic Church but to other churches as well. The Coptic Church in Egypt had little devotion to Mary in its ancient liturgies, but its modern liturgies contain much worship to Mary. In the Ethiopian Church Mary is also worshipped, it is said Mary existed in the body of Adam in the form of a white pearl that shone in his right side. Similarly in the Syrian Church Mariolatry has grown. In the Orthodox Church, Mary is prayed to for protection and mediation, but on the whole the Orthodox Church does not venerate Mary as much as the Roman Catholic Church does.

The Church of England has not been entirely free from Mary worship either. Some of the Caroline Divines encouraged it and false teachers such as Anthony Stafford (who described Mary as a fountain of grace in a book illustrated with an engraving of the assumption) encouraged devotion to Mary. The Oxford Movement developed this further, giving Mary a semi Roman place of exaltation. The most famous example of Mary worship in England can be witnessed at Walsingham. ‘Our Lady of Walsingham’, the parent shrine to 180 other shrines in the Church of England, attracts thousands of visitors (including Church of England bishops and priests). Anglo-Catholics within the Church of England parade through the village carrying a statue of a madonna and child. The madonna is crowned with a silver crown, decorated with lilies and held aloft by several attendants closely followed by a procession of people dressed in ornate robes, rosary beads, crucifixes and incense, chanting the *Ave Maria*. A new statue of Mary has recently been installed in Ipswich (to replace the one burned in the Reformation).

CONCLUSION

Throughout Church history there has been a tendency for a gradual and growing veneration of the Virgin Mary. Today Mary is worshipped by millions of people on a similar level to Christ, and in many ways has displaced the position of Christ. However, according to the Bible, Mary was an ordinary Jewish woman chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. She submitted to God's plan, admitted her own sinfulness and her need for a Saviour and trusted in Jesus for her salvation. She did not fully understand his mission and he rebuked her on several occasions. She witnessed bravely the death of Jesus and rejoiced in his resurrection and lived as a faithful Christian and was buried. She stands out to us as an example, as others in the bible, of faithful Christian living. She is wrongly worshipped by Roman Catholics (and others) who claim she was immaculately conceived, sinless, a perpetual virgin and assumed bodily into heaven as Queen and sovereign, and once in heaven to perform as a mediator and a redeemer, to be prayed to, honoured and worshipped. The most serious implication of all this is that it detracts from the majesty of Christ and honour due to him alone is diverted to others. Every magnification of Mary is a denigration of Jesus and is harmful to the truth of the gospel.

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE VIRGIN MARY

THE ANNUNCIATION

Luke's Gospel contains the most detailed account of the life of the Virgin Mary. The words spoken by the angel Gabriel show that she was favoured by God and that the Lord was with her: "*Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!*" ch 1 v 28. "*Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favour with God.*" Mary's initial response was to '*be greatly troubled*' and to fear, which was the response of other faithful saints who had been visited by an angel. Although Mary questioned the angel Gabriel: "*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*" she quickly showed humility and faith in God's word: "*behold, I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.*" In this way all Christians should humble themselves before God, recognising that they are God's servants and believing God's word. As Jesus instructed his disciples: '*When you have done all that you were commanded, say, "We are unworthy servants, we have only done what was our duty."*'

THE TESTIMONY OF ELIZABETH

Importantly, Elizabeth in Luke chapter 1 also recognised the faithfulness and blessedness of Mary. It is worth noting the character of Elizabeth, that she was righteous before God and walked blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord (ch 1 v 6) and who was filled with the Holy Spirit (v 41). Elizabeth's praise of Mary is therefore significant because it came from a righteous and faithful woman filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth praised Mary: "*blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!*" (v 42). Elizabeth also showed humility toward Mary when she visited (v 43) "*and why is this granted me that the mother of my Lord should come to me.*" Elizabeth then praised and acknowledged Mary's faith in God's word spoken to her: "*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.*" However, it must be noted just why Mary was held with such high esteem by Elizabeth. It was because of the fruit of

Mary's womb and because she was the "mother of my Lord." Because Mary was the mother of Jesus Christ.

THE MAGNIFICAT

Mary's response to Elizabeth's praise of her was to praise God. Mary did not praise herself or think of herself worthy to receive such blessing, but praised God for His salvation and for blessing her. These verses known as The *Magnificat* contain the majority of the recorded words of Mary in Scripture. (See Luke 1.46-56)

From Mary's words should be noted the abundance of Old Testament quotations. There are verses or portions of verses from many Old Testament books including the Song of Hannah in the book of Samuel, a number of Psalms, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Malachi, Zephaniah, Deuteronomy, Daniel, Ezekiel, Job and Genesis. Whether by hearing or by reading, Mary's memory was full of Scripture. When she came to praise God she used words which had already been inspired by God. Mary stands as an example to Christians of someone with a faithful knowledge of scripture and who used it in her praise to God.

Secondly, her humility is again evident. She spoke of her humble estate and described herself as God's servant. She also acknowledged her need of a Saviour. She recognised her own sin, and position before God. Christians would do well in learning from Mary true humility and submission before God. *'Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you.'* (1 Peter ch 5 v 5-6).

Thirdly, Mary's thankfulness should be noted. *"My spirit rejoices in God my saviour, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for he who is mighty has done great things for me."* Mary is an example of what it means to have a thankful spirit. All those who have been saved have so much to be thankful for and should emulate Mary in cultivating a spirit of praise and thankfulness to God for what he has done. *'And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the*

name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' Colossians ch 3 v 17

Fourthly, Mary remembered God's former dealings with his people. *'His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation...* In reciting these portions of Old Testament Scripture Mary remembered and showed appreciation for the way God worked for and through his people. No doubt she was recalling the way God had blessed Joseph, Moses, David, Esther and Daniel; but had also brought low Pharaoh, the Canaanites, the Philistines, Sennacherib, Haman and Belshazzar. All Christians should imitate Mary by examining the way God has worked through history and how he has dealt in the lives of his saints since God is the same yesterday, and today and forever. (Hebrews ch 13 v 8)

Finally, Mary's faith in God's promises are evident. *'He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring for ever.'* She recognised that the promises made to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him were finally coming to fruition through her Son. Mary sets an example of trust and faith in God that he will keep his promises.

FAITHFULNESS DURING HER LIFETIME

Mary was faithful to God in obeying the angel's command but also, along with Joseph in keeping the Old Testament requirements regarding circumcision and purification (cf. Lk 2.12-22)

Later her faithfulness and obedient are still evident not least that she was a witness to the crucifixion and, after the resurrection, was to be found as part of the community of believers : *'All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.'* Acts ch 1 v 14.

MARY FALLIBLE

However, although Mary is a model of Christian faithfulness and obedience, the few references to her in Scripture also show that she

did not entirely understand Jesus or His mission and that on occasion He had to rebuke his mother. When His parents searched for the young boy Jesus in the temple he responded “*Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?*” ‘*And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them.*’ Mary’s reaction was ‘*to treasure up all these things in her heart.*’ In these few verses the character of Mary is revealed, her humanness and lack of understanding of Jesus’ mission but also her faithfulness and love.

When Jesus was preaching to the crowds Mary and his brothers came to speak to him, but instead of patiently waiting until the crowds had dispersed they desired to see him. Jesus response to them was to exclaim that: “*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.*” This response repudiates any notion of Mary being worthy of any more respect than any other believer.

It is also noteworthy that Jesus’ brothers did not understand Jesus’ mission nor it would seem did they believe in him at the start of his ministry. They said to Jesus: “*For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.*” *For not even his brothers believed in him.*’ (John ch 7 v 5). If Mary had a better understanding (and maybe faith?), would this have reflected on her other children having more faith and understanding of Jesus?

Therefore, although Mary sometimes did not fully understand Jesus’ mission and had to be rebuked, yet she feared and submitted to God, was faithful to His word, and was humble and faithful before Christ’s birth, during his lifetime and after his ascension into heaven. All Christians should learn from her example.

THE PLACE OF MARY IN THE SAVING PURPOSES OF GOD

THE GRACE AND MERCY OF GOD

Throughout scripture we see that God delights to use the things of little repute. He chose Israel not because they were the greatest of the nations but simply because of His own love (Dt 7.7,8). When Israel

wanted a King he gave them the ideal model of an earthly king - Saul. But when Saul failed he provided them with a man after His own heart, David, the youngest son, a shepherd boy. Likewise Mary was a simple girl. Despite the efforts of some to invent legend we know virtually nothing about her, she arrived unannounced on the stage of human history and yet has a supporting role more important than any other. This is the way God works and it ought to be a great encouragement to those of us who are inclined to feel out of our depths in His work or believe that we are insignificant in the scale of things. *God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty (1 Cor 1.27).*

The world of our day revolves around personalities. All too often the Church imitates this and we can seem to believe that somehow the Christian message is more credible or truer if a sportsman or actress endorses it. In reality it is all too easy for the personality to get in the way of the gospel. The reason that God chooses the weak and simple is in order that we should not glory in ourselves, but that the glory should rest in Him (1 Cor 1.29). It is significant therefore that Mary's song of praise (Luke 1.46ff) moves quickly from speaking of herself to glorifying God. This is a worthwhile model, we enjoy the praise of others but are we always eager to reflect that praise onto our Lord?

MARY'S PLACE IN THE SAVING PLAN OF GOD

If the incarnation shows us how God delights to use our weakness for His glory then the Apostle Paul shows us how God the Son gave up His glory in order to take on our weakness. Unless it was revealed Paul could not have known what he affirms in Philippians chapter 2. The eternal Son of God emptied himself (or made himself of no reputation), in order to be found among us.

In a way it mattered little whether Mary was a princess or an ordinary peasant from Nazareth. It mattered little whether Jesus was born in a palace or a stable. When we consider what was taking place, from God's perspective there is surely no difference between princess and peasant, the step down, the extent of self-emptying is no different. But from our perspective the choice of Mary and Joseph, the stable,

the shepherds, all shows us something in terms we can understand and relate to about how much Christ gave up for us, about how much God has stooped down in order that he might lift us up.

The coming of the Son of God was part of the plan of God from before the beginning of the world. It is an idle game to speculate whether God could have done it any other way. What we see throughout the Bible is that God is consistent in His practice of using people, even downright unsuitable people on occasions, in order to accomplish his saving works. He does not just play with us as if we were a collection of tin soldiers. We are His creation, made in His image and it seems to be His delight to draw us into his purposes. In the Old Testament we see this again and again, despite their failings God chose men and women to fulfil His purposes.

So it is with Mary, in her we see that God's saving plan is accomplished through human beings. She does not add anything to salvation, and yet she is part of God's saving purposes. Before grace was shown to her she was nothing special, now we remember her as blessed by God because God chose to work through her. It mattered that Jesus should be born, that the Son of God took flesh and was made man. It mattered that he was fully divine and yet fully human. God's saving plan could not have been achieved without this. Jesus took His human nature through Mary. Quite how the mechanics of the virgin birth worked is not revealed to us but it mattered that Jesus was human, flesh of flesh and bone of bone.

Therefore in all these things what we should chiefly learn from Mary is not about her, nor about ourselves, but about God and his saving work, about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and what that means to us.

THE CHILD BORN TO DIE

When the child was taken to the temple Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce her soul (Lk 2.35). We understand what this means because we have the benefit of hindsight. Doubtless it was something of a mystery to Mary at the time, but one of those things that she *treasured up*. When she stood at the cross watching her Son

die she knew the truth of what had been said. Yet it seems that even she had not grasped the true significance of what His death meant. Surely she could have known because of the words which the angel had spoken to Joseph in his dream - *Mary your wife...will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*

The sword of grief pierced her heart as she watched her Son die on the cross, but hidden away were the treasures of the truth she had stored up - that He was not simply her son but the Son of God who had taken flesh and been made man. He was dying not as some mistaken radical, but for the sins of His people.

There is much that we can learn from Mary about what it means to respond to the grace of God, and about how we can be slow to grasp the working of God. Yet in the end Mary, like all the people of God in the Bible should point us away from themselves and to the Lord Jesus Christ. Mary was immensely privileged, blessed by God. Yet even so in the grace and mercy of God the privilege that was shown to her is available to us because the Son of God died for us on the cross. We too can be counted in the family of Christ if we in obedience to His word, put our faith and trust in Him, and in Him alone.

Jesus said *'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it'* (Lk 8.21).

This paper has been adapted from a series of articles which were published in the Church Society magazine Cross†Way

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Church Society, Dean Wace House,
16 Rosslyn Road,
Watford WD18 0NY
Tel : 01923-235111 Fax : 01923-800363
admin@churchsociety.org