

## **SERMON FOR ST JAMES, KING STREET, SYDNEY ON THE FEAST DAY OF MARY, MOTHER OF OUR LORD – 18 AUG 19**

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Isaiah 61.10 - 62.3  
Song of Mary  
Galatians 4.4-7  
Luke 2.1-7

+In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I'm not a musician, but I'm often moved as I listen to music. Music helps me to get in touch with my emotions and express things that are difficult to put into words.

The music that most speaks to me is not that which revels in chaos or tacky sentimentality. The music that most speaks to me gives expression to the shadow side of existence; it's honest about the realities of loss, frustration and fear, while at the same time, affirming the possibility of grace and endurance. I like music that's political too; beautiful music that affirms human dignity, the innate value of the earth and the defiance of love in the face of greed and violence.

As Notre Dame Cathedral burned last April, crowds gathered in the streets of Paris. Strangers who happened to be on the same footpath at the same time of day were brought together in an impromptu congregation. Together they were transfixed by the inferno, standing or kneeling before the power of chaos and destruction. I wonder who it was that first started to sing? Soon, many others in the crowd joined in. In resolutely secular France, voices were raised, singing the pious words of a simple Catholic prayer:

Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you;  
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.

Facing powerlessness and grief, sometimes words can be cheap. The usual conversational strategies fall flat. When words fail, a song can fill the void. The crowd sang of grace, divine life and hope, while not denying the realities of sin and death before their eyes.

Mary, mother of our Lord, was also known to be a singer and the church has been joining in her song for millennia. Mary sang on receiving the news that she was to give birth to the Saviour; the hope of Israel and redeemer of gentiles. Her song magnifies

the Lord. It speaks of a revolution that God had already enacted, and which continues to unfold from generation to generation.

This is a revolution that proclaims what has always been the case: that God exists and God exists as holiness, mercy and goodness. God exists to free his people. It's a revolution grace, in which the dignity and freedom is continually reasserted over and against those clinging to power and wealth in ways that diminish people and destroy the land.

Mary's song speaks of faith. Despite the terrors and griefs of this life we know ourselves to be held in the everlasting arms. In our darkness God's light may break in, in our hunger holy bread is given, in our thirst, Christ comes as living water flowing up within our hearts. In a world of pitiless violence and rapacious greed, God's peace and God's justice beckon; a new kingdom comes.

Thinking of the Virgin Mary and her unexpected pregnancy, we might be struck again by the fact that Almighty God would express his power with such humility. This is not a revolution of coercion and violence. It's not a revolution of pomp and gaudy display. It's a revolution emerging from the most unexpected place, by way of the unlikeliest of persons. It comes by way of by way of Mary's freely uttered *amen* – "let it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).<sup>1</sup>

If St Paul is correct to say that all of God's promises find their 'yes' in Jesus Christ then Mary words are the supreme instance of a believer's 'amen' in response to this 'yes' of God.

It is for this reason Orthodox Churches of the East call Mary the *Panhagia*, the 'all holy'. She is the one standing at the head of a great crowd of disciples and the saints from every age on pilgrimage to the heavenly city. She's called blessed as the first to welcome God's incarnate Word, the first to share Christ with others.

Since the council of Ephesus in the year 431 Mary has also been called the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God or the 'God bearer'.<sup>2</sup> The term captures the sheer audacity of the Christian belief that her son was fully human and fully divine, *and* that these two natures meet in Jesus in a wonderful exchange; a mystery to inspire worship rather than a frustrating contradiction. As *Theotokos*, Mary willingly united her own desire to God's desire. And, as if to repeat the story of Genesis 1 in her own life, the Spirit of God brooded over the face of the deep, and a new creation emerged, untainted by sin.

As well as attracting such exalted terms as the *Panhagia* and the *Theotokos*, Mary has been likened to Israel's Temple; her womb the Holy of Holies. She's been likened to

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<sup>1</sup> See *Mary: Hope and Grace in Christ*, The Settle Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, especially section 5, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20050516\\_mary-grace-hope-christ\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20050516_mary-grace-hope-christ_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> Discussion of Mary as *Theotokos* and *Panhagia* see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary; Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 1999, 15-16.

the burning bush, witnessed by Moses; a bush aflame but not destroyed by God's indwelling. Mary has been compared to Eve; sharing everything of Eve's humanity, except her refusal to obey the voice of God.

In more recent times Mary has been projected into various gender and culture wars. Mary has been cast as a proto-feminist, perfectly capable of excelling without the help of Joseph, thank you very much! Or Mary is portrayed as a submissive woman who does her duty by bearing children, meekly submitting herself to a resolutely male God.

Both camps miss the mark. Against the idea of Mary as heroic feminist, we affirm that her greatness does not so much flow from her own efforts, achievements or even her gender identity, but from her openness to God's grace and a willingness to serve. Against the Mary of the patriarchs, however, we affirm her as an inspiration for the dignity and emancipation of women in the face of male domination and efforts to enforce silence.

Perhaps all this goes to show that we should be cautious about recruiting Mary to our causes and ideologies. We should let her speak, and sing, for herself.

One writer shares the bare facts of Mary's life in this way:

At the time of Jesus' conception, she was a resident of Nazareth in the region of Galilee. She was engaged to and eventually married to Joseph, and later she gave birth to other children. We are given the names of no other relative except for that of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, who was her cousin. Mary's sacrifice of turtledoves or pigeons following Jesus' birth suggests that she was from a poor family, as the sacrifice of sheep was prescribed for those who could afford it. That sacrifice, as well as the comment that she and Joseph annually celebrated Passover in Jerusalem, suggests that she was a devout Jew. Her presence at the cross and with the apostles in Jerusalem following the crucifixion suggests that, at least eventually, she was accounted among Jesus' followers.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, we know of three instances in which Mary faced life-altering hardships:

- The birth of her first son was irregular and she risked public disgrace.
- This son refused to follow a conventional life and was accused of being mad and dangerous.
- This son was publicly executed as a revolutionary and blasphemer.

Mary endured a heavy burden and the words of a novelist come to mind: "Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it's easy you are a fool. If you think it's natural you are blind."

Today we remember the Blessed Virgin Mary: a woman of faith who knew the price of love. Perhaps she might stand for all women who've been shamed because of an

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid,

unexpected pregnancy. Perhaps she can sing on behalf of women who remain invisible to the male powers of the world, and yet hold within them the divine spark of creativity and endurance. Perhaps Mary can console those who've found parenting traumatic and exhausting. Perhaps she might be a source of comfort for families whose hearts are pierced with the loss of a child. Perhaps, in her simple 'amen' to God's word, she can inspire all women and men; all of us seeking to live in the light of Divine mercy.

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