

## WILL THE REAL VIRGIN MARY PLEASE STAND UP? <sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, 14 August 2022, being the celebration of Mary, Mother of Our Lord**

On 18 December 1956, the US television company CBS premiered a new show called *To Tell the Truth*.<sup>2</sup> The format was simple. A panel of celebrities faced three subjects who each claimed to be the same person. Two were able to lie but the actual person was required to tell the truth. The punch line was, "Will the real Jane Doe please stand up?" The format has been repeated through 17 seasons, although not continuously, and was still running in 2021.

I have called this sermon, "Will the real Virgin Mary please stand up?" You might be offended by my apparently flippant approach but, in truth, the real Virgin Mary is hard to define, let alone discover. I have at least three candidates: the young Jewish woman and mother;<sup>3</sup> the subject of God's actions in the birth of Jesus;<sup>4</sup> and the theological figure.<sup>5</sup>

We know very little about Mary the girl, young woman, and mother. But we can reconstruct some parts by knowing about the customs of the time. Bill Loader, in his exploration of sexual behaviour in biblical times,<sup>6</sup> suggests that men married, at about age 30, women much younger than they were. Assuming that Joseph, Mary's husband had not been married before and was aged 30, she could have been as young as 13, and not more than 15, an age that would be shocking for us now. Many women died in childbirth before they were 30. Had Joseph been married before, we need not suppose that Mary would have been older because an early start to childbearing was essential. Given that Jesus died at about age 33, and that Mary was at the crucifixion, she may have been between 46 and 45, quite old for her time. We do not know when she died.

We are told that Mary was betrothed to Joseph when she became pregnant.<sup>7</sup> Adrian Thatcher, in his study of the ethics of cohabitation, comments on the significance of betrothal in the formation of marriage in New Testament Judaism. A betrothal, occurring about a year before a marriage was as permanent as the marriage itself. It could be dissolved only by a form of divorce. He notes that, although Matthew assumes that no sexual activity took place during a betrothal, that was not the universal practice. To the extent that bearing children was a principal feature of being married, sexual contact and pregnancy during a betrothal may have served to ensure that the marriage would be fertile.<sup>8</sup> Thus, when Mary became pregnant, people might

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<sup>1</sup> Readings:

<sup>2</sup> [To Tell The Truth - Episode #243 - Nov. 6, 1961 - YouTube](#)

<sup>3</sup> [The real MARY OF NAZARETH - a woman's life in ancient Israel \(womeninthebible.net\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Feminist Christmas story \(eurekastreet.com.au\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Lee, [How the cult of Virgin Mary turned a symbol of female authority into a tool of patriarchy \(theconversation.com\)](#). See also, Joan Taylor and Helen Bond, *Women Remembered: Jesus' Female Disciples*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2022, Chapter 8, "Mary the Mother of Jesus" and *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIS) (the Seattle Statement) 2004, [mary-grace-and-hope-in-christ\\_english.pdf \(anglicancommunion.org\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> William loader, *Sex, Then and Now: Sexualities and the Bible*, Eugene, Cascade Books, 2022

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Thatcher, *Living together and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, Chapter 4

not have been surprised, except that, as recounted by Matthew, Joseph knew that the child was not his.

In his chapter 12,<sup>9</sup> Matthew reports that, on one occasion, Jesus' mother and brothers were standing outside to speak to him, possibly wanting to restrain him. Jesus takes the opportunity to say that his true family are his disciples. Does Jesus here distance himself from his mother and brothers? Was their relationship always smooth? We can well imagine the strain that his mission placed on his family. Nevertheless, his mother was present when he died and later at Pentecost.<sup>10</sup>

Around the life of this Jewish woman, Matthew and Luke weave the birth narratives. They change her from a simple young woman to an instrument of God's will. It is not appropriate here to take those narratives apart. Yet, as Dorothy Lee points out, they create a tension between the vision of a submissive and obedient woman and a strong contender for social justice. Consider the *Magnificat*. It begins with submission but quickly becomes a beacon for the transformation of the world, extolling the casting down of the powerful and the raising up of the weak.

Lee says:

[Women have] found great solace in the compassionate figure of Mary, especially against images of a very masculine, judgmental God, and the brutality of political and religious hierarchy.

The irony of this should not be lost. A fully human Gospel symbol of female authority, autonomy, and the capacity to envision a transformed world becomes a tool of patriarchy.

By contrast, the Mary of the Gospels, the God-bearer and priestly figure—a normal wife and mother of children—confirms women in their embodied humanity and supports their efforts to challenge unjust structures, both within and outside the church.

In 1991, Bev and I were touring in Turkey and staying in Selçuk, a town near the site of Ephesus. Early one morning, I rose and drove the seven kilometres to Mt Koressos, where stands a building claimed to be the house of Mary. It is said that having been taken to Ephesus by the beloved disciple, she lived and died in this house.<sup>11</sup> The link to Mary is extremely tenuous, the house having been “discovered” through the visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824), a Roman Catholic nun and visionary who had never visited Ephesus, which had not then been excavated.<sup>12</sup> I went to mass there, partly on account of the site and partly because it is very difficult in most parts of Turkey, to receive communion. I can say nothing of the veracity of the claims about the house. They have never been verified by any church authority and seem to me to be unlikely. What I can testify to is the aura of the building as a place of pilgrimage.

It is strange how locations can take on an atmosphere because of how they are treated, even revered. When we turn to the theological figure of Mary, we find that the same has happened to her. Think of the prayer known as *Ave Maria*. Just this week, after the death of Dame Olivia Newton-John, ABC Classic FM found a recording of her singing *Ave Maria* to the music of

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 12:46-50

<sup>10</sup> Acts 1:14.

<sup>11</sup> [House of the Virgin Mary - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Anne Catherine Emmerich - Wikipedia](#)

Schubert. The emotion of Schubert's composition turned Newton-John into a singer different from the one in *Grease*.

Mary has been named Θεοτόκος, "the Mother of God", she has been declared to have been conceived immaculately, without original sin; she has been said to have been taken bodily into heaven, either without dying, as some Catholics assert, or on her death, or Dormition (Falling Asleep), as the Orthodox say. Indeed, today, called by us the Feast of Mary, the Mother of Our Lord, is celebrated elsewhere as the Assumption or the Dormition. Officially, Anglicans regard those beliefs as adiaphora ("things indifferent") on which none of our doctrine depends.

If then, I ask my question, "Will the real Virgin Mary please stand up?", I will not be surprised if all three candidates, the young Jewish woman and mother; the subject of God's actions in the birth of Jesus; and the theological figure, stand, because they all carry truth.

How then should we regard her, a truly significant but ambiguous figure? In his book on the Creeds, Rowan Williams notes:

Only three human individuals are mentioned in the Creed, Jesus, Mary and Pontius Pilate: that is, Jesus, the one who says 'yes' to him and the one who says 'no' to him. You could say that those three names map out the territory in which we all live. Through our lives, we swing to one pole or another, towards a deeper 'yes' or a deeper 'no'. ...

And when we think of Mary, we should not be afraid of recognising her special role. ... Mary knows her business. By her consent she makes Jesus possible in that place, at that time.<sup>13</sup>

Or perhaps we should resort to poetry rather than prose. Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his poem, "The Blessed Virgin compared to the air we breathe", says:

So God was god of old:  
A mother came to mould  
Those limbs like ours which are  
What must make our daystar  
Much dearer to mankind;  
Whose glory bare would blind  
Or less would win man's mind.  
Through her we may see him  
Made sweeter, not made dim,  
And her hand leaves his light  
Sifted to suit our sight.<sup>14</sup>

By the way, I've looked again at my three candidates and find that now there is only one. The real Virgin Mary has stood up, complex and whole.

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<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2007, pp. 76-77

<sup>14</sup> [The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe | Gerard Manley Hopkins \(hopkinspoetry.com\)](http://hopkinspoetry.com)



*19th century photograph  
of a young Bedouin girl*



*The Annunciation*  
fresco by Fra Angelico, 1438-45;  
the Museum of San Marco, Florence



*Mary Trampling the Serpent's Head*  
Painted wood  
Cathedral, Vivier, France