

Mary: God's radical daughter



Approaching the Topic

Think back over your family heritage. Recall the faces and memories, past and present. Is there a particular woman who stands out? A woman who sets an example for the rest of the family? Someone who embodies its values in a striking way? Perhaps this woman offers a unifying presence. She is able to bridge the differences between conflicting members. Or maybe she said or did something of great significance. Perhaps you never knew this family member when she was alive, but her memory has been passed on to you by those who did. She is present to you. You feel as if you know her.

The Catholic community has such a woman. She is called by many titles, but the simplest way to speak of her is to call her by her first name: Mary.

Who is Mary? To Catholics, Mary is the mother of Jesus. She is part of the communion of saints, but we honour her and seek her influence more than all the other saints because of her unique place in the story of Christianity. What do we know of Mary? The scriptures record only a little about her life. However, the ongoing experiences and reflections of the Church over the years have led to a rich tradition affirming the significance of Mary in the life of God's people.

Mary in the scripture story

The Annunciation

The gospel story tells us that Mary came from a little 'back-of-Bourke' town called Nazareth. The first event of her life that is mentioned is her betrothal to Joseph. It was at this time that God's call on her life took a dramatic leap. You can read the story of her call in Luke's account of the annunciation (Luke 1.26-38). According to this Gospel, Mary receives the visit of an angel, who reveals to her that she is to bear a child who is to be called the Son of God. Mary asks how this can be possible since she is a virgin. The angel replies:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the holy child to be born will be called Son of God (Luke 1.35)

Accompanying this message, Mary is given a sign: her aged cousin, Elizabeth, is already six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible to God, the angel reminds her. Mary's response, open and trusting to God's mysterious plan, is one which has inspired generations of Christians.

'I am the servant of the Lord, let it be done to me as you have said.' (Luke 1.28-38)

With the conception of Jesus, Mary became the first person to receive the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. For this reason, we sometimes describe Mary as 'first among the



words from an ancient Jewish song:

'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit exults in God my saviour. He has looked upon his servant in her lowliness, and people forever will call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me...' (Luke 1.46-49)

Mary's story reminds us of the powerful way God's Spirit moves among ordinary people, 'little' people; for in a worldly sense she was not a person of any notoriety or fame but a simple Jewish girl; and such are the ways of the world that the poor have no history. It is precisely in the face of this

faithful'. Through her acceptance of the angel's message, God became present to us in human form. Mary's pregnancy draws contemporary Catholics to contemplate the fact that the Gospel is more than simply assenting to a message, a principle or a just cause; it is about welcoming a person, Jesus, and uniting with him in the core of our beings.

The Visitation

Upon receiving this extraordinary news, the gospel tells us that Mary set out to share it with her cousin, Elizabeth. The visitation is a beautiful story of two women rejoicing in God's marvellous blessings upon their lives; two mothers, each uplifted by the infant in her womb. You can read it for yourself in Luke 1.39-56. Their meeting is a grace-filled moment, full of enthusiasm. Upon seeing her cousin, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and feels the baby within her move for joy. She cries out:

'You are most blessed among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'

Like Elizabeth, Catholics rejoice at what God has done through Mary. *'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you...'* is a well-known prayer which declares our belief that this woman has been powerfully blessed by God.

Mary responds to Elizabeth's greeting by praising God, using

paradox that the Church honours her with titles such as 'Queen of Heaven'. God's ways are not our ways. Greatness in God's eyes comes not from wealth and power, but from self-giving love. We honour Mary's greatness because of the way she gave over her life to God's plan. Today, Mary's song of praise (the Magnificat) inspires Christians who find themselves dispossessed of the economic or political power that is rightfully theirs, especially in countries where the Church suffers political oppression.

The birth of Jesus

The next time we meet Mary in the Gospels is at the birth of her son. We are told that she gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem; not in a comfortable maternity hospital nor even in a clean room, but in a stable, a shelter for animals, since there was no room for them at the inn. The first to greet this new-born king were shepherds from the surrounding countryside. Wise men from the east followed. In greeting the child, the visitors recognised the presence of God; the Messiah whose coming was foretold in the Jewish scriptures. The virgin birth emphasises this: truly, this child is like no other! Although human like us, his origin is divine. His birth points to a reality beyond this created world as we know it. So Mary's unique role in this extraordinary story was to be the vehicle through which Christ entered

Stories

How does Mary's story connect with contemporary life? Here is what some people have said:

Luke 1.38... Let's go!

'When I hear Mary's words "I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me", I don't hear a meek and passive lady wrapped up in cotton wool. Instead I hear a passionate young woman full of zest for life crying out, "Yes! Let's go! Let's get this show on the road...whatever the cost. If you're willing, so am I."' (Tony)

Our God of surprises

'The story of the angel's announcement impresses upon me how God can unexpectedly break into our lives, capsizing our flimsy plans. You never know what's around the corner! Sometimes God speaks to me through a book, a picture, an unexpected visitor, a news item. God's most surprising gift to me has been the gift of Peter. In January I met him for the first time. Six months later we were engaged to be married!' (Donna)

Guess what?!

'I can remember a number of occasions in my life when I was the bearer of life-changing good news: announcing our engagement to friends, breaking the news that our first baby was on her way, ringing my parents when she was born, telling the kids that Gran had come through her operation. Such moments can be joyous, anxious. Always they demand a response from within. As a mother bearing the Best News of all, Jesus Christ, how much more must Mary have felt that mixture of emotions.' (Jeanie)

the world. Through her we are led to Jesus. To this day, Catholics approach Mary as a special mediator of Christ's presence to us.

Other stories about Mary

The Gospels contain a number of other references to Mary during the childhood of Jesus which you may like to read for yourself. We can guess that, like every mother, Mary worried about her son, like the time the family was forced to flee to Egypt upon hearing that King Herod was bent upon destroying the child (Matthew 2.13-23). There must have been situations where parenthood exasperated her, like the time Jesus went missing in the Temple after their



trip to Jerusalem (Luke 2.41-51). She must have pondered his future with a mixture of awe, delight and fear at hearing the prophecies about him. She must have pondered and feared, too, as she glimpsed the reality of her own future: a sword would pierce her heart. Along with the privilege of her call, much suffering would be hers (Luke 2.22-39)

At the foot of the cross

What mothers hasn't experienced the suffering of seeing her child in pain? Whether it be through illness, accident, a broken romance or taunts in the school playground, a mother's heart aches at her helplessness in such moments. The gospels tell us that Mary stood at the foot of the cross while her son died the slow, painful death of crucifixion. Her heart

must have been broken in a suffering beyond belief. John's gospel tells us that, in that agonising moment at Calvary, Jesus entrusted Mary and his disciple, John, to one another:

When Jesus saw the Mother, and the disciples, he said to the Mother, 'Woman, this is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'There is your mother.' And from that moment the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19.26-27)

As Catholics, we see ourselves also as recipients of that mother-child relationship. Like John, we are entrusted to Mary as our mother. Like John, we take her into our hearts and make a home for her there.

At Pentecost and beyond

The next time the Gospels mention Mary is at Pentecost. When the apostles gathered in the upper room and the Holy Spirit came upon them in a powerful way, we are told that Mary was with them. (Acts 1:14)

In fact, it is interesting to note that when one traces Mary's appearance in the scriptures, she is consistently linked to the Holy Spirit. So significantly has God's power been at work in her life that we have come to see in Mary a particular sign of humanity's vocation: to receive and respond to the activity of God's Spirit. We get a sense of this in the last book of the bible (the book of Revelation) where the author points to Mary's destiny beyond history. In chapter 12 she is called woman (Rev 12.4,6), which is a biblical way of comparing her to Eve, the original woman in the book of Genesis. Whereas Eve represents humanity's fall into sin, Mary witnesses to a life lived in the grace of Christ. She is seen as the personification of the Church, a sign of the salvation offered to the world through the transforming power of God's Spirit.

Stories

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The power of prayer

'At times when my prayer channels feel all clogged up with distractions, fatigue or grief, I find it a great help to pray the joyful mysteries of the rosary. The "mantra" quality of the repetitive prayers calms my spirit. The images of childhood bible stories (the angel, mother and baby, the Bethlehem stable and so on) slip easily into my heart. I find the simplicity and gentleness of the rosary frees my mind and unclutters my soul.' (Nicola)

Her embrace

'The image of Michaelangelo's pieta is a very telling one for me. My boyfriend's sister committed suicide, and the heartbreak of that tragedy continues to affect both him and our relationship as a couple. Sometimes I feel just so helpless. Whenever I see a replica of the statue I sometimes see that young woman, sometimes my boyfriend, sometimes myself, lying crucified in the arms of Mary. I find it comforting to know that for Mary too there was a time of "no solutions".' (Karen)

To Jesus through Mary

'Sometimes I find it difficult to face Jesus in prayer. I might be feeling angry at him. Or apathetic. At times like this I find it easier to go to Mary and talk to her. She tenderises me. She helps unblock the hardness in my heart. She opens up the door I have slammed in the face of her Son and leads me to him.' (Arthur)

A woman for all seasons

As Australians we live in an era which is becoming more and more sensitised to the contribution of woman. As Catholics, too, we must grapple with issues relating, not just to the place of women in our structures and functions, but – more deeply – to the place of ‘the feminine’ in our consciousness and experience of Christianity, and how that interacts and reciprocates with ‘the masculine’. While practical solutions take time to emerge, we can be sure of one

thing: it is no accident that God chose to be revealed through the womb of a woman. We are led to ponder and question the significance of the feminine in our experience of faith. As Catholics we believe that our understanding of Mary and our relationship with her is essential to our capacity to enter fully into the freedom of the Gospel. Her presence beckons us on to explore a uniquely feminine face of Christianity.

Your Story

- Read the Gospel story of Mary’s call in Luke 1.26-38. Then think back over your own life.
 - What new directions have you been given?
 - How have you said ‘yes’ to a call you have felt in your heart?
 - How have you perceived God’s part in this call?
- Read the Gospel story of the visitation (Luke 1.39-55). Do you have an ‘Elizabeth’ in your life; a ‘soul-friend’ to whom you can turn to share what is most important to you?
- ‘My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord...’ are the words of Mary’s song of praise in Luke 1.46-55. Who and what do you give praise for? Do you experience God as being faithful to you? Today, pray Mary’s canticle, conscious of the gifts and goodness in your own life.

Rejoicing in God’s gift of Mary

Marian feast days

When a community of people harbour a common value or share a common relationship that is important to them, they feel moved to give expression to this belief in concrete ways. A family birthday celebration is a simple example. Similarly, the Church has a number of Marian ‘feast days’. Some of these are listed below:

The Immaculate Conception (8 December)

Mary, although fully human, was conceived without sin and remained sinless throughout her life. This feast draws us to contemplate, not only Mary’s beginning, but our own. Ultimately we belong to God. God’s love claims Mary’s entire existence. We, too, seek to allow God to envelope our whole selves.

Mary’s Birthday (8 September)

A birthday celebrates the gift of life and a person’s entry into the human community. By remembering Mary’s birthday we give thanks to God for the gift of her life. Although we do not know the exact date of her birth, the Church has chosen September 8th to celebrate this event.

The Annunciation (25 March)

Through the message of an angel, Mary discovers that she is to be the mother of Jesus.

On this day, Catholics often reflect upon their own call to say ‘yes’ to God’s call on their lives.

Mary, Mother of God (1 January)

Through her cooperation with the Holy Spirit, Mary became mother of Jesus, the Son of God. On this day we often reflect upon the fact that because of our relationship with Jesus, Mary is our mother also. Mary’s maternity is more than a theological concept. Throughout the centuries, Catholics everywhere have experienced the life-giving presence of the Spirit through their relationship with Mary.

The Assumption (15 August)

On this feast we celebrate our belief that, at the end of her earthly life, Mary was taken up by God in the glory of the risen Christ. Mary’s assumption into heaven is a sign of hope that we, too, will be raised to glory with God. We look forward to the day when all creation will be transformed in God’s love.

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