

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful. Kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and you will renew the face of the earth.

Let us pray: O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit has instructed the hearts of the faithful, grant, by the gifts of the same Holy Spirit, that we may always be truly wise and ever rejoice in his consolation, through Christ our Lord.

Our Lady, Mother of God. Pray for us.

Mother of God – or *Theotokos* in Greek – is the title for Our Lady that was thrashed out in the fifth century at the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. It is as much about who – or what - Jesus is, as about being an honorific title for Mary his Mother, because it is affirming that the human Jesus, undoubtedly the human son of the woman Mary, was also God.

Anyway, October is the month of the Rosary, in fact next Wednesday is the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, so this morning we are going to use a few of the Mysteries of the Rosary to consider what it meant to be the Mother of God, the God who had emptied himself of his Godness to become human like us and who was named Jesus.

The first Joyful mystery of the Rosary is the Annunciation, when the Angel Gabriel appeared in a vision to Mary to tell her that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and would bear the Son of God. Mary is also told that her aged cousin, Elizabeth, was already expecting a baby, so it is not surprising that she immediately rushes off, on a journey of forty miles or so, to see Elizabeth and find out if all this is true or was it just a dream. And she finds that Elizabeth knows all about it too and praises Mary for her faith – unlike her own husband, Zechariah, who was struck dumb for not believing the angel who told him that his wife would have a son despite her old age.

So the second Joyful mystery, the Visitation, is not just about a charitable work of Mary going to help with the birth of John the Baptist but also the opportunity come to terms with her own extraordinary pregnancy as she was able to talk it over with the only person who could possibly understand. Before eventually, after John the Baptist's birth, returning to Nazareth, by now with an unmistakable bump, which she would have difficulty in explaining to her fiancée and her parents.

There is some medical and psychiatric evidence that the unborn but sentient foetus can not only be conscious of the moods and feelings of his or her Mother but also can later recall this. Some intelligent, educated adults are able to remember what they experienced in the womb of their Mothers, from the first trimester.

Every pregnancy is going to disrupt the Mother's life. It may get in the way of her education or her career. It may bring disgrace or even expulsion from her family. Obviously, there are also many cases where the pregnancy brings delight: a long awaited child that both Mother and Father have been hoping for. The modern research indicates that all of these emotions and reactions are felt by the foetus and have an influence on whether it later develops into a well balanced human being or someone who knows that she or he was never wanted.

Mary knew that even if Joseph and her parents understood, she would have to face her neighbours, who would inevitably judge her to be deserving of stoning to death. No wonder Joseph took his heavily expectant wife with him on the 80 mile trek to Bethlehem to register for the census, which is where the Birth of the Messiah, which we know as the third Joyful mystery, took place.

So, if the psychiatrists are right, the unborn Jesus would have been conscious, within Mary's womb, of her joy at his coming, of her fears and also of her apprehensions about what her fiancée Joseph and her family would say but the unborn Jesus would also be aware of her faith and determination that enabled her to integrate all these feelings. It

was this faith and determination, born in him in the womb of his mother that would later enable him to integrate his own fears and apprehensions in Gethsemane, with faith in His Father even when he thought that even he had deserted him. “My God, my God, why have you deserted me?”

So we can think of Mary’s Motherhood as consisting not only in bringing God into the world as a human being, but also in helping form his personality as a human being.

From Bethlehem it was a journey of only a dozen miles or so, eight days later, to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord in the Temple, as every observant Jewish Mother did with her first-born son, which we remember in the fourth Joyful mystery. And there she hears the prophecies of Simeon and Anna, the former foretelling not only the controversy that Jesus would provoke but also the suffering that Mary would have to undergo. A lot of material for Mary to keep pondering in her heart, as Luke tells us.

Twelve years later, at the annual celebration of the Passover in Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph both experience the trauma that all parents experience, as their offspring begin to stretch their wings and show their independence. Jesus goes off on his own, and after three days of frantic searching, Mary and Joseph find him in the Temple in discussion with all the Jewish teachers, the fifth Joyful mystery. He has begun to be conscious of his Divine parenthood ‘Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business’ but he goes back with them to Nazareth to live under the authority of his human parents. You can find most of this in the first two chapters of the gospel of Luke.

We don’t know, and so can only imagine, the conversations that went on in that family as Jesus grew up. He would have been told about his cousin’s extraordinary birth and would have heard how John had renounced his birthright as son of one of the Temple priests and instead gone into the desert, dressed outlandishly and living very simply but

gaining a large following of people, as he preached the necessity for individual repentance, if the long promised Messiah was to come to the chosen people of God. And he baptised them in the river Jordan as a sign of their new commitment.

In the first Luminous mystery of the Rosary, we remember that Jesus came to see his cousin and insisted on himself being baptized by him. It was his own turning point as he heard his Father confirming him as His Son in whom he, God, was well pleased. Jesus's message was the same as his cousin's: 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.' But the kingdom that Jesus would be preaching would be a very different one from what John was hoping for. He would not be putting an end to the Roman occupation but preaching a gospel of love, though the signs he gave were sufficient to satisfy John in prison, before he was beheaded, that Jesus was indeed the Messiah who fulfilled the prophecies in a way John hadn't previously foreseen.

The first of these signs we remember in the second Luminous mystery: the Wedding Feast at Cana and here again we see the Mother of God, of Jesus, at work. Throughout all these years of pondering, as she has taught her son, as any Mother does largely by example, how to love – how to put other people first - she has been wondering how her son will manifest himself as the Son of God who has come to deliver their people. As the wine runs out she pushes him into the world, as she had pushed him into the world 30 years previously, this time to do good. When he demurs – 'My time is not yet come' – like any woman she uses the strategy of indirect approach and, instead of arguing with him, she just tells the waiters to do what he says. And 150 gallons of ordinary water turn into very special wine. This was the first sign, says St John; for the next three years he is going to be turning very ordinary people into very special people and 2000 years later he is still doing this.

Later, when the rest of his relations want to disown him as he is becoming notorious, Mary plays the part of the mother reconciling the

black sheep with the rest of the family as she brings them to listen to his preaching. The third Luminous mystery is the preaching of the Kingdom.

And then, throughout the Sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary, we meditate on the fulfilling of Simeon's prophecy that a sword would pierce her own heart as she had to watch while he was condemned as a criminal, while he was scourged, mocked and crowned with thorns and then, labouring along the way of the cross. She had to listen as the nails were driven into his wrists and feet and watch the three hours of torture. Anyone who has watched a loved one die in excruciating pain knows something of what she felt. There is no love without pain.

But with love there is also joy and she experienced the joy of all followers of Christ at his Resurrection, without which our faith, St Paul tells us, would be a waste of time. The first Glorious mystery indeed.

The last two Glorious mysteries of the Rosary are the Assumption of our Lady into heaven and her Queenship of heaven and all the saints.

It is these two that speak of Mary not only as the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Mother of God but also our Mother, Our Lady.

We know that Jesus last action on the cross was to give his Mother to us, through the person of St John. Our Lady's Assumption into heaven is important for us, because it shows that Jesus's own Resurrection applies to us humans as well: the Assumption means that Our Lady's body has passed from this earth to heaven. She was not God but the fact that she has passed to God's presence means that that is the future that we too can look forward to. And as Queen of heaven we can count on her and her prayers for us. That's why the monks sing the Salve Regina every evening at the end of Compline. Its English translation is the Hail Holy Queen.

Many people find the Rosary difficult. My own experience has varied over the years. We used to say a family Rosary every evening and

sometimes this was just a gabble through it, interspersed with giggles. But even then it has value as a giving up of time to God. Sometimes one tries to concentrate on the meaning of the words of all the Our Fathers, Hail Marys and Glory Be's – that doesn't usually last long. Sometimes it helps to think about the various mysteries and what and who lie behind them as we have tried to do this morning. And at other times it just acts a mantra as we try to make ourselves available to God amid all the distractions of everyday life. You might want to try it again sometime today.

And if you find the Catholic pre-occupation with Mary rather over the top, you are not alone and I recommend a little book called *Rediscovering Mary* by Tina Beattie. She is a Professor of Catholic Theology who grew up in Zimbabwe as an evangelical protestant, deeply suspicious of 'Mary worship' but became a Catholic despite finding this an obstacle and then, as a Mother of young children herself, gradually came to identify with Mary and pray the Rosary.

And at the end of Vespers in May and October the monks sing the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, which is the earliest known prayer to Our Lady, dating from a Greek papyrus of about 250 AD. So let us end with that:

We take refuge under thy protection,
holy Mother of God:
Do not despise our prayers in time of necessity:
but always free us from all dangers,
O blessed and glorious Virgin.