

Yeesterday was the feast of the Motherhood of Mary, closing the Octave of Christmas. This makes it suitable to examine a little how Our Lady or, as the Americans put it 'Our Blessed Mother', is treated in scripture. This is an important topic, for there are still many who see Catholic devotion to Mary as an obstacle to Church Unity.

Catholics are accused of worshipping Mary in a way that only God may be worshipped. From the first, therefore, it is important to remind ourselves that the favourite and typical Catholic prayer to Mary, the Hail Mary, begins with two strictly scriptural greetings to Mary, first the greeting of the angel Gabriel at the annunciation, and secondly Elizabeth's greeting to Mary at the Visitation, both in the gospel of Luke. These two greetings are followed by a prayer asking Mary to pray for us. Therefore on this subject we need to remember that we Catholics pray *with* the saints rather than *to* the saints; we are asking Mary to join us in our prayer now and at the hour of our death.

Let us, then, begin with these two scenes, remembering that Luke is a past master at expressing theology by means of story. When we think of the Annunciation we almost always picture the scene as portrayed by Fr Angelico as a fresco on the wall of one of the cells of the Dominican Convent in Florence, Mary piously kneeling at her prie-dieu (sometimes with a rosary in her hand) and the angel hovering on outstretched wings before her.



None of these circumstantial details is authorised by the scripture. I would prefer to replace them with a more earthly rather than heavenly scene. Mary was betrothed to Joseph, and it was normal for a girl, in that age of dangerous child-bearing and high infant mortality, to be betrothed as soon as she was capable of conceiving a child, and to be married a few months later. Let us assume that Mary was thirteen, doing the ordinary household tasks of a girl, honing the skills that she was soon to need for running her own simple household. I think we need to put her on her own, to give her a chance to reflect. What was she reflecting on? What thought should we put in her head as she looked after the sheep (at lambing time?) or scrubbed the family washing?



My guess is that she was planning the wedding, perhaps sewing her dress, perhaps thinking of the hordes of children which she and the handsomest boy in the world would have, when suddenly the message of the divine messenger (that is what ‘angel’ means) came into her. The Greek says εισηλθεν, ‘entered in’; it could mean entered her room, her house or her head, not necessarily a visible presence; the vital element is the message: it was not her own thought, but was put into her head. The first word says it all, or nearly all. This greeting, ‘Rejoice!’ occurs four times in the Old Testament, and each time it heralds the coming of the Messiah, e.g. Zephaniah 3.14, ‘Rejoice, daughter Jerusalem, the LORD has removed your sentence, the LORD is king among you, Israel’ or Zechariah 2.14, ‘Rejoice, daughter Zion, for now I am coming to live among you, declares the LORD’. So Mary would have recognised its meaning from listening in the synagogue. Our translation of the next word, κεχαριτωμενη, *plena gratiae* or ‘full of grace’, comes from St Jerome. The basic word χαρις, comes to be rendered ‘grace’ from its similar sound. It really means ‘graceful, lovely, delightful’ like a graceful and lovely dancer. It has been translated or paraphrased, ‘you have found favour in God’s sight’, but it is in the perfect tense, pronouncing something permanent, the permanent loving relationship of God to Mary. If I think her lovely I give her a present, she smiles back and becomes even more lovely and pleasing.

If you want to call that the Immaculate Conception, you may! She has always been perfectly pleasing and delightful to God. What went on in her own mother’s womb is to me less important than the fact that as mother of God’s son she must have been perfect, without any evil tendencies, without any fall from perfection. A fault in the mother has its effect on the child. In Mary’s case, however, it is the opposite that is true. There was never any trace of pride in her words to Elizabeth, expressed in the *Magnificat*. It is a canticle of pure praise of the Almighty who ‘has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant’ and ‘raised up the lowly’. The song is full of the words of scripture, stressing again and again the loving care of the Lord for his servants ‘from generation to generation’.

This confidence in the Lord’s care comes to its climax in the narrative of the birth of her son. One can imagine the anxiety of the young girl as the moment of child-bearing gets nearer and nearer in a foreign city, far from home, with no help, no mother to reassure and guide her. There was no room for her anywhere. The phrase

should not be translated 'no room at the inn'; the meaning is far wider, and the normal word for an inn is quite other, πανδοχειον not καταλυμα. Here the word expresses the space where people settle. Imagine a single-roomed building (or traditionally a cave) where the cattle are housed in one part and the humans in another – the cattle, of course, provide the central heating. So destitute is Mary that there is no room for the mother to give birth in the part designated for the humans, so she gives forth her child in the cattle-area and lays him in the cattle trough as the only safe untrampled spot. There she is visited by the destitute shepherds, the poorest of the poor, who have no sheep of their own and are reduced to guarding at night the sheep of others. Luke's message is clear, that the promised Messiah comes to the poor, the forgotten and the neglected, the faithful remnant who live in hope.

Mary never vented anger or annoyance on her son. She was never impatient, even when, as a typical 12-year-old, he forgot to tell her he was staying behind in the Temple. Like any 12-year-old, he simply assumed that she would know. A mother who had less patience and less confidence in her son might well have unloaded onto him the anxiety of a three-day search.

How much she knew and understood about him we do not know: she pondered all these things in her heart and she never doubted him. That was why at the wedding-feast at Cana she accepted his rebuff, knowing that she could trust him to solve any problem in his own way and his own good time.

In the synoptic gospels Mary barely appears elsewhere. Once, when Jesus was surrounded by a crowd of listeners, he is told that his mother and brothers are looking for him, only to reply, 'Who are my mother and brothers?', turning away and seemingly giving preference to those listening, 'These are my mother and my brothers; whoever does the will of God, this is my brother and sister and mother.' So it stands in Mark, the earliest gospel (3.32-35). It is significant that Luke (8.20-21), presumably seeing this gesture as a criticism of Jesus' mother and brothers, cuts out the gesture and the contrast, so that mother and brothers, instead of being excluded, are included in the final blessing on those who hear the word of God and keep it. To confirm this Lk also includes the blessing of the woman in the crowd, who cries out, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked', which Jesus himself confirms, 'Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it' (11.27-28).

In the gospel of John, however, there are two scenes in which Mary really plays a significant part, one at the beginning the other at the end. The first significant scene of Jesus' ministry, after the gathering of the first disciples, is the marriage-feast at Cana. This is recounted with careful attention to its symbolism. Firstly, it begins 'on the third day', which heralds its importance by the suggestion of the day of resurrection 'on the third day'. Its significance is underlined by Jesus' repeated use of the image of the wedding-feast as the consummation of the love-affair between the Lord and his people, a stormy love-affair in which God steadily shows his love of his people Israel, first in the honeymoon period of the desert of the Exodus, 'I am going to seduce her and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart. There she will respond as she did when she was young, as on the day when she came up from the

land of Egypt' (Hosea 2.17). Again and again Israel was unfaithful, in a way so vividly and brutally described by Ezekiel's address to Israel:

You were exposed in the open fields, for you were abhorred on the day you were born. I saw you kicking on the ground in your blood as I was passing, and I said to you as you lay in your blood, 'Live, and grow like the grass of the fields.' You developed, you grew, you reached marriageable age. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew but you were stark naked. I passed by and looked on you. Your time had come, the time for love. I spread my cloak over you and covered your nakedness; I gave you my oath, I made a covenant with you – declares the Lord GOD – and you became mine. I bathed you in water, I washed the blood off you, I anointed you with oil. I gave you embroidered dresses, fine leather shoes, a linen headband and a cloak of silk. I adorned you with jewels, gave you bracelets for your wrists and a necklace for your throat. I gave you a nose-ring and earrings; I put a beautiful diadem on your head. You were adorned with gold and silver and dressed in linen and silk and brocade. Your food was the finest flour, honey and oil. You grew more and more beautiful; and you rose to be queen. The fame of your beauty spread through the nations, since it was perfect, because I had clothed you with my own splendour – declares the Lord GOD. But you became infatuated with your own beauty and used your fame to play the whore, lavishing your debauchery on all comers. You took some of your clothes to make for yourself high places bright with colours and there you played the whore. You also took your jewellery, made with my gold and silver which I had given you, and made yourself male images to serve your whorings. You took your embroidered clothes and used these to dress them up and you offered them my oil and my incense. And the bread I gave you, the finest flour, the oil and honey with which I fed you, you offered them as a pleasing smell, and so it was – declares the Lord GOD. You took the sons and daughters you had borne me and sacrificed them as food to the images. Was not your whoring enough in itself, for you to slaughter my children and hand them over to be burnt in their honour? And in all your loathsome practices and your whorings you never called your early days to mind, when you were stark naked, kicking on the ground in your own blood.

Nevertheless, despite this infidelity, God did not renege on his promises:

I shall remember my covenant with you when you were a girl, and shall establish a covenant with you for ever. I shall renew my covenant with you; and you will know that I am the LORD, so that you remember and become ashamed and in your confusion be reduced to silence when I forgive you for everything you have done – declares the Lord GOD.

This is the significance of the marriage-feast at Cana, strategically placed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' hour has not yet come, that 'hour' which strides through through the gospel, and comes to fulfilment only at another meal, the Last Supper, when Jesus, 'knowing that his hour had come' loved to the end those who were his in the world (13.1). But the impetus at Cana is given by Mary. It is she who starts things off, by appealing to her son and then giving the word to the wine-waiters and in full confidence leaving him to advance that hour which had not yet come. Another symbolic detail, the six water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification are turned into the wine of the final wedding-banquet. The numbers are significant too: six is one short of the perfect number seven, and so is the ultimate sign of

incompletion attainable in Judaism, whereas the immense quantity of wine, over 100 gallons, signifies the plenty of the messianic times; there is no stinting here! It is Mary who sets all this in motion with her appeal to Jesus.

At the other end of the gospel of John, the crucifixion and death of Jesus we again find Mary, and this time she is committed to the Beloved Disciple. Christian tradition, determined to find an author for this gospel, has settled on John the son of Zebedee although the sons of Zebedee appear only in the final chapter of the gospel. However an unnamed disciple 'whom Jesus loved' is mentioned four times. He reclines next to Jesus at the Last Supper (13.23). He is present at the crucifixion (19.26). He runs with Peter to find the tomb empty, and believes, though Peter does not (20.8). Finally, by the Lake of Galilee, he is mentioned as the guarantor of the tradition which is to be passed on (21.22-24). On each occasion the Beloved Disciple is paired with Peter, but he is never named. There must be reason in this anonymity, and the most acceptable reason offered is that he stands for any anonymous disciple who Jesus loves. This disciple is close to Jesus at the Eucharist and shares his knowledge, he is close to Jesus in his passion, he recognizes the resurrection even before Peter, and he is the guarantor of the tradition. These are four essential marks of the disciple whom Jesus loves. I would suggest that when he is linked to Mary, committed to her and she to him, this marks the foundation of the Christian community. It is only when Jesus has so joined the two that he pronounces the words, 'It is completed', and bowing his head he gave over his spirit. In this last sovereign action of Jesus, handing over his Spirit, he already imparts the Spirit to the Church. It is another of the instances of John writing in a deliberately ambiguous way, as he has done throughout the gospel in insisting that a man must be born again, in his gift of the living water and the living bread from heaven, in speaking of his being lifted up from the earth for human salvation. Here too John is writing on two simultaneous levels in handing over his spirit to Mary and the Beloved Disciple to form the new Christian community.

The importance of these two Johannine scenes with Mary, at the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry, ensure her place not only in her function as mother of Jesus, that is, in his birth and upbringing, but also in the revelation and founding of the Church.