

Rediscovering Mary

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, Mothering Sunday, 18th March 2007.

(2 Timothy 1:3-7, Luke 1:39-56)

For a long time one character in the Bible, more than any other, made me nervous. Or maybe nervous isn't the right word. Uneasy. And that character was Mary, the mother of Jesus. I think what made me uneasy was some of the things people have done to Mary over the centuries. There are some rather strange 'Marys' around:

1) You've got the Mary who's almost a goddess. When we go on holiday I sometimes look in local churches. I remember going to one church that was called something like 'Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy'. And the entire church was filled with images of Mary. At the front was a huge painting of Mary with a big halo around her head. There were statues of Mary with candles in front of them. There were prayers written to Mary and pinned on boards.

Not a single reference to Jesus, or even to God. It was as if God was somehow too remote to be prayed to, so Mary herself became the focus of prayer and worship.

And then you've got those 'Hail Marys' that some people are asked to say after Confession. You've got the traditions about Mary that don't come from the Bible, but grew up in some churches: the Immaculate Conception (the idea that Mary was born without sin and stayed that way all her life), and the doctrine of the Assumption (the idea that she never died, but was taken up to heaven miraculously). And then there are those alleged appearances of Mary in Lourdes, Fatima, Walsingham and other places. What's all that about?

But the thing is - a lot of Catholics are also unhappy with this whole idea of Mary being a focus of devotion in her own right. For a while I lived in France and a local monastery actually had to put up signs on the door for the people coming to pray. The signs said: 'Don't pray to Mary! Focus on Jesus - he's the one we worship!'

Then you've got:

2) Mary the ideal of feminine purity and innocence. Again, this is an emphasis you get in some sections of the church. The idea that Mary embodies a certain type of purity or other-worldliness. She's a role-model of perpetual virginity, a kind of first-century nun.

Now, there's no evidence from the Bible or anywhere else that Mary did remain a virgin. In fact, there are lots of references to Jesus's brothers and sisters. And the kind of other-worldly, anti-body spirituality that's crept into the church down the years didn't even exist in the culture that Mary was a part of. The Jewish spirituality that she was raised in was very practical and down-to-earth. It was based on family and community, not on cloistered separation. So we can be sure that this Mary doesn't have any basis in history.

But this whole image of Mary as untouched and other-worldly has left an image in people's minds. She's not normal. She's not like the rest of us, caught up in our busy and messy lives.

So some church leaders, like me, want to react against these embarrassing distortions of Mary. So much so that we're tempted to leave her out of the picture altogether. We think of her a bit in Advent, when she becomes a character in our nativity scene. But we can avoid talking about her the rest of the time, in case people get the wrong idea, or overstate her importance. So what I want to do this Mothering Sunday is to try to rediscover the real importance of Mary, and learn to appreciate her in a new way.

Now, we don't actually know much about Mary's early life. But we do know a bit about the way girls of her age, from that part of the world, would have been brought up. She would have gone to a local school run by the synagogue. The schooling would have been free of charge, supported by donations from the congregation. And boys and girls were taught to read and write in separate classrooms.

But a lot of Mary's education would have been at home. Women married young in those days, usually by their mid-teens. So Mary would probably have been in her early teens when she was engaged to Joseph, a local carpenter and general builder, who would have been a few years older than her.

The main focus of most women's lives in that culture would have been in the home. So she'd have learned from her own mother about managing a household. She'd have learned to weave fabric for clothes. And she wouldn't have expected a comfortable or glamorous life. Women would have worked long hours, and barring any medical problems they'd be expected to have several children.

And it was also in the home that she'd have learned most about her faith. She'd have heard her father reciting the Shema, the Jewish affirmation of faith, twice a day every day. And her family would have celebrated all the main Jewish religious festivals, and later she would have taught Jesus to do the same.

So this week, I decided to re-read some of the episodes in the life of Mary, seeing her not as a plaster saint or goddess, but as a living, breathing first century Palestinian young woman and mother.

I re-read the familiar accounts of her discovering that she was going to be pregnant, and the panic that followed. I read the story of the journey to Bethlehem, and I imagined Mary's feelings when they found there was no accommodation. I read about the quick escape into Egypt, and then about family life in Nazareth with Jesus and all his brothers and sisters. I imagined her taking Jesus to the same school that she went to. Then I read about her watching while Jesus was put on trial and executed as a criminal. And with each episode of the story, I tried to imagine how Mary would have felt about it all.

One of the stories that stood out for me was the occasion when Jesus was 12. They took him to the Temple in Jerusalem, for one of the big celebrations there, and they lost him. There was that terrible panic when they were on the way home and realized that Jesus wasn't with friends or relatives in the group, as they'd thought he was. And when they do find him, Mary is absolutely furious. What she actually says is: 'We've been looking everywhere for you, How could you do this to us?'

So often people focus on Jesus's calm response about having to be in his Father's house, in the Temple. But this time I focussed on the blind panic that Mary would have felt. And her mix of anger and concern when she spoke to him afterwards. And I remembered the time our son Daniel ran off in Sainsbury's and I couldn't find him for a while. What happens is that you get more and more frantic, and you start imagining all the awful things that could happen to him. That's what Mary must have felt too - only more so.

So this Mothering Sunday I want us to rediscover Mary. Our culture's become used to seeing images of a Mary who's super-human and other-worldly. A Mary of gold-leaf icons and silver pendants. This week I found it far more moving and powerful to begin to rediscover Mary as a real person. A young mum who experienced the intensities of human emotions: shame, fear and anxiety, joy, love, and intense grief.

What made Mary special wasn't that she was born without sin, or that she embodies some unattainable ideal of purity. What made Mary special is that she was an ordinary young mother who said yes to God. A woman who trusted God, even though it meant that her life would be turned upside down as a result. And her 'yes' to God changed the face of history.