

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Fourth Sunday of Advent Yr B 21 December 2008

2 Samuel 7.1-11,16 The Song of Mary Romans 16.25-27 Luke 1.26-38

How do you get along with your mother? Even if your mother has died, as mine has, she will still be 'alive' in your life. Mothers, dead or alive, make us and shape our lives, especially the early years—for good and ill.

It's common for other women in our lives to play a mothering role. My sisters and I had Aunty May, our mother's sister. She lived in the next street. If we were bored, or in a bit of strife and it was a good idea to clear out for a while, we went to Aunty May's place. She had Arnott's biscuits and Peter's ice cream (our mother insisted on home made) and a welcome without too many questions. It was a great alternative to home! We all loved her and, although I didn't know it at the time, (and I don't know that she did either) she remedied some of the more complicated love our mother gave us. Yes, mothers and mothering is not only important - it's foundational. When we have choices to make about our lives we may have to unlearn some of what our early mothering taught us. Some people have to unlearn a lot of it if it has been damaging. We certainly need to reflect upon our mother's legacy as we grow into the fullness of adult life.

Over the centuries Christians have come to honour Mary, the mother of Jesus. All generations have called her blessed. Mary's place in the biblical story means she *must* be taken seriously. Sadly, for some Christians she has become a forgotten disciple, ignored and even disrespected. It should not be so among us! Anglicans have always held Mary in high regard. Anglicans do that as inheritors of the ancient common tradition of the Church. And we do it without adopting the inflated claims about Mary's role in our salvation that came later.

Be in do doubt: Luke's portrayal of Mary shows her to be singled out by God for a unique purpose. The angel calls her 'favoured one'. The words imply that Mary is *singled out* for God's grace for a particular purpose. Marvel at how God prepared Mary to be the mother of Jesus. She, who is already *full of grace* as the angels says, will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. That's the same Spirit who brooded over the deep to bring forth creation. Here is a *new* creation! Here is a new Adam, as Paul will later call Jesus Christ; a radically new human being whose faith remedies the havoc brought about the disobedience of the rest of us.

Of course, this is a symbolic way of talking about Jesus' birth. Right from the outset Christians have understood that this language must not be thought of in too physical a way. Luke is directing our attention to the significance of the birth of this one baby Jesus whose life *even from the very moment of conception* is the fulfilment of God's purposes and promises for his people. We are being told in story form what the Church later taught in doctrine: that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. The Creed says he who is 'eternally begotten of the Father' is also he who 'was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human.' *This is the bold and basic claim of the Christian faith.* Jesus the Christ was born of a woman just like every other human baby while at the same time his whole being comes directly from God. The witness of all the gospels is that Jesus knows the very mind and heart of God and reveals it completely and with authority through his fully human life. Fully human and fully divine. The words are easily said yet they contain a great mystery. Without Mary's 'let it be as God's asks with me' her response to God's yes to our humanity that mystery could not have become clothed with human flesh – our human flesh!

If we struggle to accept that God is so positive towards our humanity, it will be because we find it hard to accept and love who we are. If our mothers or the adults who first cared for us have been ambivalent about us, or maybe even rejected us, we may find acceptance takes a long time and a lot of work. In fact, it seems to me that everyone shares in this struggle of self acceptance in some measure no matter how loving their early life has been. I'm not talking about blaming anyone, just making an observation about what seems to be true.

Pondering the place of Mary can help us with these struggles. She, who is the mother of the incarnate Word, is also mother to all that the Word brings forth. She is Christ's foremost disciple: there at every key moment of his life; there at the foot of the cross, and when the Spirit is poured out upon the Church to bring it to birth at Pentecost. She can become as a mother to us, pointing us to her son, and as sister to us praising God with us and singing the songs of justice and mercy until kingdom come. And she also points us towards the mothering of God, in whose image Mary and every girl baby ever born, is made. We need Mary to discover the fullness of Jesus' humanity, just as we need women and men as equals in Christian community to discover the fullness of who we are. And we need the fully lived, full humanity of women to discover, women and men together, more of the mystery of the One we so inadequately name God.

Remember the old joke about the uptight man who never recovered from being told that he was born naked in a bed with a woman? He represents the tragic outcome of the rejection of bodily life and of women. To reject these realities is to reject the full truth of the incarnation. In all its glorious embarrassment we are bodies: wrinkly crinkly and saggy or trim, taught and terrific and everything in between. People who ignore that reality live a kind of amnesia. It's the same for Christians who try to ignore Mary and her pregnancy, as if she were an embarrassing relative whose life you would rather no one knows about. Such Christians live remembering far less than the fullness of God's plans in coming among us in human flesh. It's about as foolish as pretending you never had an earthly mother in whose body your own once grew.

Remember Mary, be grateful to her for Jesus, pray with and ask for her prayers, and you might just find for yourself a mother who brings you to God, for the mothering of God to hold and love you; love you beyond any baby's deepest needs and any adult's most demanding hopes! Love *you* so that you love the very flesh of which you are made— as was Jesus, the Word made flesh.

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