

## Address for 15 August 2021 by Jonathan Draper

Communion, St David's, 15/8/21  
Mary the Mother of Jesus

Celebrating the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary in August always seems a little counter-intuitive to me, though with the weather we've been having, it does begin to feel a lot like Christmas. We even turned on the heating in the cottage we rented in Wales last week.

If I can be just a little bit personal, and perhaps a bit controversial, this morning, I'd like to say that temperamentally and theologically I prefer Christmas to Easter, and not just because of the presents. What I mean is that for me incarnation is the more profound event: God becomes one of us, one with us, joins us in our human condition, comes to know us from the inside, as it were, and not just from outside. God is born, and nothing can ever be the same again.

Pivotal to the incarnation of God among us is, of course, a young woman named Mary, and today we can remember and celebrate her role in the story of our salvation. I've not often had the opportunity publicly to reflect on Mary and her role; truth be told, I've probably avoided it. In the very Protestant and conservative evangelical traditions in which I grew up, Mary was almost a peripheral figure. Incarnation, in these traditions, was all 'Act of God' in which Mary was but the vessel by which God's will is done. To think otherwise was to think that a human being played some part in our salvation, when salvation was understood to be a pure act of God's grace: God does something for us that we couldn't do and does it without our help or aid or even agreement. Mary's role is simply to acquiesce to the announcement of the Angel that she is to give birth, whether she likes it or not, to a child who will be Son of God and the salvation of Israel.

This was in sharp contrast to what we were told Roman Catholics, some Anglicans, and other idolaters believed. Mary in these traditions was seen as an active participant in our salvation, even seen as a sort of co-redeemer with Christ, and who now sits as Queen of Heaven making intercession for us with her Son and the Father. Mary was worshipped, we were told, as a sort of second God, when God alone in Christ should be worshipped; she was prayed to, along with all sorts of other so-called saints, when only God in Christ should receive our prayers. Mary was a sort of fourth person of the Trinity, if that isn't too absurd a thing to say. And as for the statues of her in churches, well that was just pure and sinful idolatry; and they were often vulgar.

Neither of these views, of course, is helpful. The Protestant view is too hard and blinkered: of course our salvation is an act of God's grace, but at the most fundamental level it requires at the very least our co-operation, and Mary shows this in her somewhat bemused 'yes' to God. The Catholic view, if I can put it that way, makes too much of Mary by, in my view, removing her too far from her humanity. She is, of course crucial to our salvation, but is not its author; Mother of God she may be, but she is no more divine than you or me. There were many before Mary who co-operated with God for our salvation; there have been others since and even today, who, in their very humanity, can also bring God to birth for us.

Because we know almost nothing about Mary, it is easy to see how logic un-tempered by evidence could make more of Mary than might be warranted. Mark and John tell us nothing about the birth of

Jesus, and Mary only really features in John towards the end. She is there, in the Book of Acts, at Pentecost with the rest of the disciples, but nothing is made of her place or presence; and Paul tells us nothing more. Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus more from Joseph's point of view, and so it is only in Luke that we get very much about Mary. Later traditions give us names for her parents, but once Pentecost has come and gone, we don't even know where she lived or how she died. We know nothing of what she did or the circumstances of her life before the angel makes his announcement to her. She's engaged to Joseph, who is a carpenter; she has an older cousin Elizabeth who is just ahead of her in a pregnancy; her husband Joseph was not originally from Nazareth, and the baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That's about it.

But that, of course, is much more than we know about the vast majority of people who have ever lived. And what emerges from even the scant information we have about Mary in the Bible is a picture of a young woman who is pretty secure in herself, who is able, even when surprised by an angel, to accept the possibility of God working through her, and whose life is defined by her faith and, ultimately, by her love for her child. Her extended family seems to have been connected to the priests who served in the Temple, and her husband was a tradesman; all in all not quite the picture sometimes painted by those who would like to see Mary as the equivalent of a modern-day, homeless, single mother from a rough housing estate. Joseph, after all, had the means to flee to Egypt when the family was threatened. I think it is unhelpful to create myths around Mary, no matter how well intentioned they may be.

Against the iconoclastic pull of my Protestant upbringing, I have come to find in Mary some really important things for our faith and for our understanding of how God acts in our world. I may not yet be ready to join a Walsingham cell, but I have no difficulty in placing Mary right at the heart of the story of our salvation.

It may seem a slightly odd thing to say, but Mary was, first and foremost, a genuine human being, and it is in her absolutely ordinary humanity that the strength of her place in our understanding of salvation and the activity of God is rooted. The more unlike you and me she becomes, the less helpful she is, for without her full and normal humanity there is no Christ. The point of the incarnation is that God takes on the fullness of our humanity, warts and all. Jesus need not be born of an immaculate mother, with a string of immaculate conceptions all the way back down the evolutionary tree, for it is our ordinary humanity which God assumes, and through which our salvation comes. Mary need not be assumed into heaven as if it was undignified for the mother of our Saviour to die, for it is our ordinary human life and death which our God suffers and through which our salvation comes. Mary places humanity right at the heart of our salvation, for without her the Christ of God is merely another supernatural being as unconnected to the human condition as any other alien. The humanity of Mary is the humanity of God and the vehicle of our salvation.

Mary didn't have much time to prepare for Christmas, at least not in the ways that we sometimes do. For Mary Christmas, as it were, came as a bolt out of the blue; there was no run up, no sense of needing to get things ready, no list from last year from which this year could be prepared. On the other hand, Mary did have the words and traditions of the prophets of Israel and their longing for God's kingdom of justice, mercy and peace; she did have the family tradition of worship at home, in the synagogue and in the Temple in Jerusalem, and the shared sense of God's presence and purpose in her life; she did have that deep sense of the world being God's world, and the hope that God's

world should be a place where everyone lived in peace with themselves and with their neighbours, and where justice flows like a river and the stranger is loved and respected, and where no one needs to live in fear. Where, in the words of the Magnificat, the powerful are brought down from their thrones, the lowly are lifted up, the hungry fed. All of this - all of this longing and hope and expectation – is what prepared Mary for Christmas. And it is why we rehearse that longing and hope and expectation when we celebrate Advent – only 3 ½ months away – even today, for we need to prepare the ground of our hearts and the state of our faith for the coming of Christ as well.

Mary was an ordinary human being trying to live a godly life, and that was all the preparation she needed to say ‘yes’ to God. We are offered that same opportunity, to live godly lives in the midst of our normal humanity.