

“MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS”

John 19:16-27

The journey through Lent continues. Our days of preparation – however you might be observing that – lead us inexorably towards the cross, the crucifixion of Jesus the Christ. A crucifixion, although a regular event in the life of a Roman province in the first century, was sure to draw a crowd, just as public executions did in England in earlier centuries, as people were drawn towards the guillotine in revolutionary France, as still happens in some countries even today. And around the cross on this particular occasion was the usual crowd of scoffers, idle curious, angry friends and grieving relatives. Some of the disciples of Jesus were there and with them a group of women, women who had followed and supported Jesus over the past three years and were now devastated by what had happened to him. In the words we’ve just heard read, John mentions as one of the group of women Jesus’ mother. And on this Mothering Sunday we’re just going to take a few moments to reflect on her experience at the cross and how that fitted into the pattern of her response of him and to his claims.

Each of the Gospel writers mentions this group of women who stood at the foot of the cross and, as with all the other details of the life of Jesus, there are differences between the accounts, as you’d expect when four different people report an incident. Mary the mother of Jesus is mentioned explicitly as his mother only here in John’s account, but Mark and Matthew include her in their reports as “*Mary the mother of James the Younger and Joses*” (*Mark 15:40; Matthew 27:56*). If we compare that with the lists of names in *Matthew 13:55* it would confirm that this is, indeed, the mother of Jesus.

It’s only natural that Mary should be at her eldest son’s execution, really. But it’s interesting that Matthew and Mark mention her not as Jesus’ mother (in fact they seem to make a point of disassociating her from that relationship), but as one of the “*women who had followed him and cared for his needs*”. Mary seems to be there as a disciple, not as a blood relative. Her presence at the crucifixion is part of her overall reaction to Jesus, the man and the Son of God, to whom she was closer than anyone else ever could be. There seem to be four stages in her developing relationship with Jesus, which take us from the incident nine months before his birth to the upstairs room after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

Now there isn’t actually a great deal that we can find out about Mary from the accounts in the Bible. Most of what is commonly believed about her is built on legend and, sometimes superstition and has no historical basis whatsoever. There’s nothing anywhere about the Immaculate Conception, her Perpetual Virginity, her Bodily Assumption or her ability to mediate between humanity and Jesus. All those ideas have been put together over the centuries by people with a particular theological axe to grind. There are really only five or six episodes in the Gospel accounts where Mary is mentioned, and we’re going to have a quick look at all of them this morning, except the occasion when she and Joseph managed to lose their

son on the way back from Jerusalem when he was 12 years old – rather a blot on the copybook of the idea that we have of Mary as the perfect mother! So let's look at Mary's response to Jesus in those four stages.

1. HUMILITY AND OBEDIENCE

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to tell her that she was to be the woman who would bear God's son, she was in all probability only around fourteen years old, the age at which Jewish girls were usually prepared for marriage. It must have been an awe-inspiring experience for her. There she was, going about her routine business in her family home when the angel suddenly arrived in front of her. Luke tells us that she was "*greatly troubled at his words*" (Luke 1:29), rather than at his appearance.

But she was told that she had been singled out as the woman who was to bring the Messiah into the world. She had one brief objection – that she was still a virgin – but then listened to what Gabriel had to say. Her reaction wasn't what we might have expected of someone today. She didn't suddenly rush off to sell the rights to this amazing story to the first century equivalent of *Hello!* magazine. She didn't try and negotiate all kinds of conditions with the angel about what she wanted between then and the birth. She didn't leap about with joy that she was about to become the most famous woman in the history of the world. She simply replied, "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.*"

There was her first response to Jesus. She was able to recognise her position as that of a servant of God and was prepared for whatever that might entail – social stigma when people worked out the difference between her wedding date and the date of her child's birth; physical pain at the actual birth; and the tremendous responsibility of bringing up the Son of God, the agent of salvation for the whole world. It's bad enough feeling responsible for the upbringing of an ordinary child, without the added worry of knowing that you could be messing up the whole of God's plan for humanity. She was humble and she was obedient.

2. DISBELIEF AND CYNICISM

When the birth finally happened, Mary must have had all that the angel told her confirmed. Strange people who could never have known about this in the ordinary course of events arrived at the obscure little place where the baby was born – a group of overawed and reverential shepherds who talked about choirs of angels; a bunch of weird and wonderful astrologers from way out east with expensive gifts;

more angels with warning to leave because Herod wanted to kill the baby. Mary must have been having all kinds of strange ideas about what the future held for her son.

They went off to Egypt for a bit – not an uncommon thing to happen in the life of a Jewish family at the time – then came back to Nazareth up in the north country and settled down. As far as we know, apart from the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve, nothing particular happened for the best part of thirty years. Mary did a fair bit of “pondering things in her heart” at the beginning, then it all went quiet. We assume that Jesus learnt his father’s trade in the carpenter’s shop and life went on as usual. Mary might well have begun to think that all the fuss around his birth was really about nothing.

Then, at the age of about thirty, Jesus took off into the desert, got himself baptised by John (again, nothing unusual about that) and spent a long time on his own just praying, apparently. However, when he returned from the desert, he started preaching and teaching in a way that obviously upset the establishment and he became quite a well-known figure in the area around Galilee, particularly after the strange incident at the wedding in Cana, when Mary had asked him to help sort out the drinks. It was starting to get to the family – by now there were other siblings, too – and something had to be done.

In *Mark 3:20,21,31-35* we read that they decided to take action. Jesus was obviously mad and needed to be taken in hand. It wasn’t reflecting well on the family. This little episode reminds me of scenes in Carla Lane’s *Bread*, where the whole family would march off together to sort out some problem or other. Here they come, trying to talk some sense into him. It’s obvious that they don’t really believe in what Jesus is doing and think it’s all the ravings of a disturbed mind. Mary’s early obedience seem to have turned to cynicism as she joins the brothers in saying that “*he is out of his mind*”.

3. DEVOTION AND RESPECT

Something must have happened, though, because, as we’ve seen, Mary is included in the list of Jesus’ followers when they gather around the cross – not as his mother, but as a follower, according to Matthew and Mark. Somehow her attitude has changed and she is now devoted to him – along with Mary Magdalene, Salome and others. She even risks the same kind of hassles that Peter had to cope with in the Chief Priest’s courtyard to be present at the crucifixion, with the possibility that the scoffers would turn on her too. She was quite obviously among the disciples as Jesus is able to ask John to look after her from the cross and Jesus’ words seem to imply that they were standing together. This woman has had a real change of heart since the last episode and she is unashamedly one of Jesus’ closest followers. And

that is reinforced as she goes along to the tomb in the garden early on Sunday morning to pay her respects to Jesus and anoint his body for the grave.

Maybe it was prolonged exposure to Jesus' teaching. Maybe it was the evidence of her eyes as she witnessed the miracles. Maybe it was a realisation that all the things she had stored in her heart in the early days were now actually being fulfilled. But here was a woman who was now devoted to Jesus, the man, the Messiah.

4. FAITH AND FULFILMENT

As Mary and the others saw that Jesus was no longer in the tomb and it dawned on them that what he had said was true, so her devotion to him as a man, her respect for him as a teacher, turned into real faith. The final mention that is made of her is in *Acts 1:14*, where she is one of the group of followers who met regularly after Jesus' ascension to pray and wait for the Holy Spirit. They weren't disappointed, as we read in *Acts 2*, and we can safely assume that the "all" in *Acts 2:1* includes Mary as well.

She had moved through the various stages of obedience, doubt and devotion to this final time of faith and fulfilment. It *was* all worthwhile! The truth had finally dawned and Mary was able to rest in the faith that Jesus was who he said he was and he had accomplished what he had been sent to do.

There might perhaps have been the temptation for Mary to capitalise on her part in the plan of salvation at this point, to have tried to set up her own little cult, but the humility and obedience that she first showed remained part of her character and she merely became another of the disciples, secure in her faith and, we assume, happy to have played some part in the story of God's love for the world. (It was left to others to build a cult around her.)

I wonder this morning what your reaction to Jesus is. Is it one of real obedience and humility, not too sure what it will all involve? Is it devotion to him as a great man, without really a complete faith in him that all he said is true? Is it a bit of a cynical response – Jesus was out of his mind, deluded, and if we take his words too seriously, we'll have to take a bit of stick too? Or is it a response of real faith – Jesus is, indeed, who he claimed to be and we can put our trust wholly in him as we seek to follow his will by the Holy Spirit?

"MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS"
Mark 15:33-41; John 19:16-27

Among the many people who gathered around the cross to see the crucifixion was a group of women who had been followers of Jesus in Galilee. One of the group was Mary, the mother of James and Joseph (*Mark 15:40*), who was also the mother of Jesus (cf. *Matthew 13:55*). It would seem natural for Mary to be at the execution of her son, but Matthew and Mark seem to put more emphasis on her being a follower of Jesus rather than his mother. In the New Testament we find very little about Mary's life, but there are four significant stages in her spiritual journey.

1. Humility and obedience

When Mary first heard that she was to be the mother of God's Son, she was probably still in her early teens. After the angel told her what was to happen, she responded with humility and obedience as we read in *Luke 1:38*.

2. Disbelief and cynicism

We are told very little about the life of Jesus between his birth and the beginning of his ministry about thirty years later. It would be quite understandable if Mary began to wonder what all the fuss was about. When Jesus began his preaching and started to attract opposition, Mary and Jesus' brothers went to sort him out because they thought he was mad (*Mark 3:20,21,31-35*). Mary's attitude seems to have changed to one of cynicism.

3. Devotion and respect

However, there is yet another change as we find that she is mentioned by Matthew and Mark as being present at the cross among those who had followed Jesus and cared for his needs. By this stage Mary is devoted to Jesus and obviously respects him too. She is among the women who were present at his burial and returns to anoint his body on Sunday.

4. Faith and fulfilment

Eventually we find Mary mentioned among the disciples who were waiting for the Holy Spirit in the upper room after Jesus' ascension. Now it is obvious that she is a woman of faith and she becomes one of the founding members of the Church.

Questions for discussion

- 1) Share with the group some of the stages you have been through on your journey of faith.
- 2) Mary's belief in Jesus seems to have taken a downturn when she thought he was out of his mind. Are such periods of doubt common to all Christians? Why do you think this happens? How have you dealt with it?
- 3) Does Jesus' attitude to his mother (especially from the cross) have anything to teach us today?
- 4) Look at *Mark 3:31-35*. What does v35 mean?
- 5) Although we might not want to go as far as some people do in their veneration of Mary, is there a case for treating Mary with special devotion? (Look at how the angel and Elizabeth addressed her in *Luke 1*.)