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THE MOTHER OF THE LORD

The feast days of the Church in which Mary, the Blessed Virgin, figures prominently, have a very special quality. They are the Circumcision (or Holy Name), the Purification (the presentation of Christ in the Temple), and, of course, preceding them all in proper order, but following them in the Kalendar, the Annunciation.

Mary is obviously a protagonist in the Christmas story, and, less evidently, at Epiphany. She was at the marriage feast in Cana; she was at the foot of her Son's cross with other women, and with St. John; and she was in the room with the disciples at Pentecost. So from the moment of her acceptance of the will of God through the angelic messenger, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee...", to the moment when that self-same Spirit descended in tongues of fire on the apostles, Mary's life is held in trust by the Holy Ghost. She remains for us both the exemplar and the paradigm of the spiritual life.

The three feasts – apart from the Incarnation, the Passion and Resurrection, and Whitsunday – with which she is peculiarly associated are not grand and public. They all involve a public profession: the acceptance of a unique vocation which would surely lead to scandal and embarrassment for the young village girl Mary was; the offering of the infant to the elders of Israel for the rite of circumcision and for the receiving of his human name; and the presentation of him with the gifts of his Mother's ritual purification, "a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons". Somehow, though, these feasts, for all that they include public professions and actions, afford us a very precious and different feeling. They are intimate. They include us in the inner circle of the Holy Family. There is a strange sweetness about them, without loss of strength. What Jonathan Swift spoke of in his Fable of the Spider and the Bee, celebrating the life and work of the bee as the producer of honey and wax, which give the world its two most valuable things, "sweetness and light" – these are the qualities, special and private and lovely, about these three feasts.

There is a secondary cycle of holy days associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary in her own right. The three most important are the Visitation (to her cousin Elizabeth), and two which have no explicit scriptural basis, but are part of the theological and devotional tradition about her. These two are the feasts of her nativity (the Immaculate Conception) and her "falling asleep" (the Dormition or Assumption).

Many people confuse the Immaculate Conception, the doctrine that Mary was born free from the taint of original sin in anticipation of her role as Mother of the Saviour, with the Virgin Birth, which has to do with the birth of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. They are not the same things. The Anglican communion has never accepted as dogma (that is, part of absolute revelation and incumbent on faithful Churchmen to believe) either the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption. This latter involves the idea that at her death Mary "fell asleep" and was taken immediately into the presence of God, without waiting, as do the rest of us, for the Last Judgement. In other words, she enjoys the fruits of the Resurrection already; just as she was given part of the grace of Redemption by anticipation in her own conception and birth. Any Anglican is free to believe these doctrines, but they are not, in our tradition, part of the dogmatic teaching of the Church.

The doctrines about Mary are part of piety, tradition, spirituality, and (maybe most truthful of all) poetry. She is part of dogma only as the theotokos, the Mother of God, as enunciated in the Nicene Creed and defined by the general Councils of the Church. The three feasts of the Annunciation, the Circumcision, and the Purification bring us close to her and awaken our love and wonder. But most important of all, I think, is the fact that what remains to us from Mary herself is – and how marvelous it should be so! – a song: Magnificat. In it she speaks the simple truth. All generations have called her "blessed", and indeed she is.

But it is, of course, her Son himself who is the infallible guide to the meaning of Mary. Once, when an over-enthusiastic lady, in response to his teaching, cried out: "Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked," Jesus replied very quietly: "Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it." He defined both the spiritual nature of his relation to his Mother as well as the inner quality of her own person when he said this. We are told elsewhere that Mary "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." And we know her great response to the angel: "Be it unto me according to thy word." The essence of her own interior life is that when she heard the word of God for her she accepted it and kept it.

This means that she is also a guide for us into the nature of her Son. At his first miracle in Cana she sees the potential embarrassment of the hosts when the wine fails. So she speaks to Jesus: "They have no wine." His reply is abrupt, as sons can often be with their mothers, but it springs from an internal conflict in himself: is this the hour for him to show what he is? His Mother is perfect in her understanding: "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it." This is her infinitely wise counsel also to us. Whatever the Lord says to you, do it. When we do, then we begin to taste the blessedness of those who hear the word of God and keep it.

One final word of Jesus has always been held to apply particularly to his Mother. It is the most precious of all, and the most terrifying for the rest of us: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." All the doctrinal definitions about Mary have been the Church's sometimes awkward way of response to this unique blessedness. She did see God, and does today, and always shall. WHR

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