

Sunday 15th August 2021
The Blessed Virgin Mary (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 16.10-end
NT: Galatians 4.4-7
G: Luke 1.46-55

If, today, you attempted to define someone by their sexual experience, I think you would find yourself in hot water. Only this week, it is thought that the gunman's concern regarding his ongoing virginity, contributed to the dreadful killings in Plymouth on Thursday evening. Yet we constantly refer to the Mary, the Mother of God, as the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I have some sympathy with this theologically. Although the early Church did not seem to have an issue with this, after all, Mary was still known or remembered personally.

But in time, the Church needed to make it clear that Jesus was born *not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

The Early Fathers struggled with making clear this most difficult concept that Jesus was born of a woman but through the power of God, making Jesus true God and true man.

I think it would have been fine if they had stopped there but somewhere the notion of a saintly woman and sexual activity became anathema. And Mary became for many this plaster saint.

Let's compare how Mary, the Mother of God is depicted with another Mary, known to Jesus, Mary Magdalene. If you look at early paintings of her, she is demure and dressed as a lady of the day but very quickly, her clothing seems to disappear in quantities and she becomes associated with prostitution.

The gospels are clear that women were an integral part of the followers of Jesus and the early Church. It was the women who provided funding, it was the women who stayed at the foot of the Cross and it was the women who went to the tomb that early Easter morning to anoint the body of Jesus. After the risen Christ appeared first to Mary Magdalen, she became known as the apostle to the apostles. But somewhere through the centuries her prestige slipped. Men have been troubled by women and their sexuality throughout time, and even today in the Roman Catholic Church, the only formal ministry for women is as Religious Sisters with vows of chastity.

But let us go back to Mary, the Mother of God, and strip away the layers of imposed piety and find her true role and person in the story of our redemption.

We see her in the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel appears to tell of her calling by God himself. We see her humility and her complete trust in God.

Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word.

Apart from her amazement as to how such a thing could happen, there is no hesitation, no bargaining, no thinking through the consequences as the whole thing could have ended very badly for her. Indeed, things did look bad for a while until the angel Gabriel put Joseph straight in a dream.

As a woman of prayer, Mary would have been familiar with Isaiah's word,

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Imagine what Mary must have felt as she reflected on the words of the angel in the context of this verse from scripture.

Mary was also familiar with the prayer of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, that great prophet of the Old Testament. So familiar that she prays her own version as we heard in Luke's gospel this morning.

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

Mary believes without question in the faithfulness of God to his people. She recognises the great honour he has bestowed on her and she knows that it is to His name that glory will always belong, not to her. Her humility is deep rooted and genuine.

For most of Jesus' life, Mary's role is not documented. But at Jesus' presentation in the Temple, Simeon makes it clear that there will be painful times *and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*

Like all good mothers, it seems that Mary quietly got on with bringing up her child, slowly letting him go but always there when needed.

And she was there, when the soldiers came to take away her son. She must have been anxious for news when he was taken to first the High Priest and then to Pilate. She was in the manic,

sweating crowd which cried out for her son's blood and she fought her way through the throng to be at the foot of his Cross. His suffering was her suffering. How could it be otherwise. I'm lucky enough to have seen Michelangelo's Pieta in St Peter's in Rome. The sculpture of Mary tenderly cradling the body of her dead son. Google it when you get home, look at her face. That is the image of someone who said *Be it done unto me according to your word* and meant it.

And after the Ascension, Mary was there in the Upper Room supporting the Apostles and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. She became the Mother of the Church. A steady, affirming presence.

It is her quiet strength, born of her complete trust in God that shines out when I think of Mary. She could have been a drama queen, she could have railed against her destiny, she could have felt crushed and overwhelmed by the honour and the burden that God placed on her. But her faith never faltered, her love for God was never diminished, she accepted the role of Mother of God with serenity and strength.

This is the Mary we honour today. This is the role model that we can seek to emulate.

Let us be open to the word of God, let us put our trust in Him completely and let us believe without question that God sees the whole picture, he knows what he is about and that if we answer his calling, we too will fulfil his purpose in our lives to his greater glory. Amen.

The Reverend Michelle Montrose