



There's something about Mary...

13 August 2017

Revd Jenny Wilkens

Revelation 11:19-12:6, 10

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 1:46-55

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

Today we keep the Feast of Mary, Mother of our Lord, and I need to say that while Mary has not played a huge part in my Christian background and journey thus far, there's something about Mary... and I'm not referring to the movie of that name here, although I enjoyed that at the time too!

There's something about Mary, and the devotion with which she is held in the Eastern Church and parts of the Western Church including Roman Catholicism and Anglo-Catholicism which intrigues and draws me.

I am intrigued how Mary the mother of Jesus can be at the same time a role-model for motherhood, and yet also exalted as the ever-Virgin sinless immaculate one, a combination from which all women are instantly disqualified. One to emulate, and yet impossible to emulate. Another paradox I struggle to fit together is this. Veneration of Mary seemed to increase at a time when her Son was perceived as becoming increasingly distant and remote: Christ Pantocrator, the Almighty, ruler and judge of all. And so Mary provided the human connection with us, the one to whom we could pray, who would intercede for us with her almighty Son.

So on the one hand Mary becomes the human face of Christ, the accessible one, but on the other at her most exalted, in the art and devotion of the High Middle Ages, she gains titles of her own such as Queen of Heaven, and even co-mediatrix or co-redemptrix with Christ of our salvation. While not church dogma, these titles continue in some Marian devotion to this day.

So as I've been grappling with all of this, it's been helpful to look at the recent (2004) document hammered out by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on Mary, called "Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ", which you can read on-line¹. I found that an interesting read, as Anglicans and Catholics looked again at each other's deeply held beliefs and traditions around the figure of Mary.

¹ http://www.ecumenism.net/archive/arcic/mary_en.htm

It is of course helpful to go back to Scripture ourselves and to look at the references to Mary in the gospels, and at the beginning of the book of Acts (1:14) where Mary was present with the community of disciples awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit to the infant church. Indeed Mary is often seen as the model disciple, the one who came to believe in the salvific ministry of her son, as had been prophesied in his infancy, and the one who was willing to suffer beside her son, when a sword pierced her own soul (Lk 2:35) at his crucifixion.

While it is helpful to mine what there is about Mary in the Scriptures, we are all too aware that after that mention in the book of Acts, we hear no more about her. There is of course strong church tradition which grew up around the passage in John's gospel (19:25-27) where John the beloved disciple received Mary, the mother of Jesus into his care, at the cross. Tradition tells that John took Mary to Ephesus, where she died and he lived to a ripe old age, eventually dying about 100CE.

Other traditions locate the place of Mary's Dormition (literally 'falling asleep') in Jerusalem, and I visited at least two places there which claim to be the sites of Mary's falling asleep in Christ.

But to come back to Ephesus, a few years ago I found it interesting to visit the ruins of ancient Ephesus in Turkey, and to see a beautiful little chapel built over the ruins of an ancient church in turn built, it is said, over the house of the Virgin Mary. The devotion in which this sacred place is held by both Christians and Muslims to this day is palpable. On the one hand, this chapel is said to have a very ancient history, with stories that the local Christians of Ephesus have long celebrated the Dormition of the Virgin in a chapel hidden in the mountains.

But it also has a much more recent history. In the 19th century, a bed-ridden German woman called Catherine Emmerich wrote a book called 'La Vie de la Sainte Vierge' under what she claimed to be divine inspiration. Although she had never visited Ephesus or Turkey, she described it with extraordinary accuracy, saying there was a chapel on top of a hill. Local Lazarist priests from Izmir (Smyrna) succeeded in identifying the spot. Archaeologists have examined the chapel, saying there are strong resemblances to a 6th century chapel, while parts of the walls date back to the 1st century.

The local Archbishop pronounced this House of the Virgin Mary as a place of pilgrimage in 1892, and it was also accepted as a place of pilgrimage by the Vatican, and has attracted pilgrims ever since.

One of the things that interested me most was that it is not only a pilgrimage site for Christians, but also for Muslims who also have a strong veneration for the Virgin Mary. This is a place where Muslim women come to pray, particularly those troubled with infertility. There are three holy springs of water, for health, fertility and prosperity - but you need to pray at the right one! We decided not to risk our luck!

But what was perhaps more poignant still was a wall of prayers, often on scraps of paper, tissue paper, whatever was to hand, prayers to the Virgin Mary.

I wonder how much of what we might call 'folk religion' is a carry over from the early goddess worship of this part of the world. We know Ephesus was the seat of the goddess Artemis, or Diana, and Artemis was regarded as virgin, wife and mother. She was a fertility goddess and assisted in childbirth.

We also know from the book of Acts (chapter 19) that Paul got into strife in Ephesus for his preaching against idolatry, causing the local silversmiths who made statues of Artemis for the tourist and pilgrimage trade of the time to riot and just about lynch him! In due time was devotion to the goddess Artemis replaced by devotion to the Virgin Mary?

Recalling that Turkey is a predominantly Muslim, though secular state, it is interesting to look at the considerable number of references to the Virgin Mary in the Quran. They make fascinating reading and it's often thought they reflect some of the stories going round at the time from the apocryphal gospels that didn't make it into the New Testament. Indeed the Islamic rejection of the Trinity is often thought to be the rejection of a corrupted Christian understanding of the Trinity that was in circulation at the time - a Trinity of Father God, Mother Virgin Mary and Son Jesus, where the Holy Spirit had dropped out of the picture. Such a literal and physical understanding of the Trinity was not acceptable to Muslim belief, and did not reflect accurate Christian faith either.

Ephesus was the scene of later riots of an ecclesiastical kind which make the current goings-on of our Anglican Communion sound quite tame in comparison!

By the 5th century CE, increasing veneration of Mary led to the use in worship of the Greek term *Theotokos* for her, literally God-bearer, but often translated 'Mother of God'.

Nestorius who was Bishop of Constantinople objected to this as he felt **God** could not be born of a woman: "God could not be 3 months old"! He decided that Mary was the mother of the *human* part of Christ, but not of the *divine* part, which existed alongside, making Christ a bit like a pair of Siamese twins, or a human with a bit of divinity tacked on.

This was fiercely countered by Bishop Cyril of Alexandria, who felt this compromised the divinity of Christ if he were not fully human and fully divine. Cyril wanted to affirm that the divine Son of God, the 2nd person of the Trinity, took on human flesh in the incarnation, so Mary was indeed Theotokos, Mother of **God incarnate**.

Nestorius asked the Emperor to convene a church council at Ephesus in 431 to sort things out, but it badly backfired on him. Nestorius and Cyril both arrived in Ephesus on the same day, but Nestorius' supporters from Antioch were delayed by flooding, as were Cyril's supporters from the Pope! Nestorius refused to front up without his supporters, so Cyril took the law into his own hands, called the council to order and had Nestorius deposed and condemned as a heretic. He eventually resigned and went off into exile, but it is interesting that a Nestorian church continued, and was quite influential in the spread of Christianity into India and China. It persists today in the Assyrian Church of the East, which has suffered much in Iraq and Syria.

Twenty years later in 451 another council was held in Chalcedon, which came up with the authoritative Christological statement called the Chalcedonian Definition, where Christ is described as 'truly God and truly human' and 'born from the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos'.

So Mary still holds that title, Theotokos, Mother of God. Let's consider also the more literal meaning of Theotokos, **God-bearer**, and think what it means for us all to be **God-bearers** into the world.

On your hymnsheet I've put a photos of a sculpture of Mary found outside Salisbury Cathedral, called the Walking Madonna. It's noticeable that she is striding away from the Cathedral, she's an older woman, but very purposeful, with her arms out as she walks. One of her hands is burnished where people have taken her by the hand. She's a woman on a mission, still Theotokos, still a God-bearer.

As we go from this place, you may like to take that word away with you, and reflect on your calling to be a **God-bearer** into our community and workplaces this week, to God's glory. Amen.