

Feast of Saint Mary the Virgin

Saint Paul's, K Street

16 August 2010

+ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

My high-school senior-English teacher was a very proper Southern lady, rather given to quaint and sometimes baffling expressions. There was one piece of advice she gave very frequently: "Liken yourself unto the Virgin Mary." I was never quite sure how to take this – it's not the sort of thing you expect to hear from a Presbyterian lady teaching at an evangelical high school, where Marian devotion was not exactly high on the list of our distinctive beliefs. As far as I could tell, she was speaking exclusively to the girls; and what she meant was, "Dress modestly, and stay chaste."

And right there you have what I think is the biggest problem with a lot of Marian devotion. The Mary of much popular art and popular piety is so syrupy and sweet, the kind of girl who never raises a fuss, never expresses an opinion of her own. She is an icon of a particular kind of bland, generic piety: tremendously intense, but also tremendously *safe*. One of the reasons I love the triptych of Our Lady of Walsingham in the Lady Chapel here – apart from its sheer beauty – is that Our Lady appears as a very formidable person. And the Mary whom we meet in Scripture is a very formidable person indeed.

Consider her reaction to the angelic salutation:

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And does "gentle Mary meekly bow her head," as one carol has it? Not just yet. She tactfully but firmly reminds the angel of the basic facts of human biology:

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

This, by the way, is the first of many pieces of Scriptural evidence that Our Lady is an Episcopalian – she wants to *understand* what she is told, and she's not afraid to be a little skeptical. Personally, an angel appears to me, I'm just going to say "Yes, sir" and otherwise keep my mouth shut; but Mary, as I have said, is a very formidable person,

and no mere angelic visitor is going to talk nonsense to her without her doing a little due diligence. So Gabriel explains:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.

And only then – only when she has tested the message, and been told the how and the why, and been shown the evidence that God is already at work in a mighty way – only then does she say her “yes” – except that, being an Episcopalian, she cannot merely say “yes”; she says, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”

Oh, yes, liken yourself unto the Virgin Mary: do not be afraid to examine what you are told, to seek to understand it. Do not be afraid to be a little skeptical. But then, having satisfied the claims of reason – and he who is supreme Wisdom will always *abundantly* satisfy the claims of reason – yield yourself in faith to the far higher claims of God’s sovereign will. Say with Mary, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” And be prepared for the Holy Spirit to come upon you, for the Most High to overshadow you.

And then Our Lady rushes down to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, and when Elizabeth greets her as the mother of the Lord and blesses her for her faith, this formidable Mary pours forth her hymn, which was our Gospel reading tonight – and you’ll pardon me for quoting it in the version that is more familiar in this place:

My soul doth magnify the Lord,*
and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.
For he hath regarded*
the lowliness of his handmaiden.

And as she goes on, singing to the Holy One, she speaks of how God is turning the world upside down. This is not the meek and demure Mary of much popular piety and saccharine art; this is the formidable Mother of Our Lord, who sees the hand of God overturning the old order and upsetting the way things have always been and sweeping in a new era:

He hath showed strength with his arm,*
 he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat,*
 and hath exalted the humble and meek.
He hath filled the hungry with good things,*
 and the rich he hath sent empty away.

Oh, yes, liken yourself unto the Virgin Mary – if you dare. We do not revere Mary because she was sweet and innocent: we revere Mary because she was bold and forthright and skeptical and faithful, because she was both a prophet and an instrument of God's incredible plan of salvation.

And there is another reason we should revere Mary, though it's one I've never heard anyone preach about. Mary, above all, points us to the *particularity* of faith. Philosophers and theologians and our own ideological bugbears too easily tempt us to put our faith in abstractions – in “the ground of being” or “pure actuality” or “radical inclusion” or “catholicity” or “tolerance” or “orthodoxy” or whatever it might be. But if we pay attention to Mary, we cannot help but notice that our salvation does not lie in an abstraction. The Word is made flesh – here, now, in *this* woman, at *this* time, as a consequence of *this* act, by which the Holy Spirit comes upon her, and the Most High overshadows her. We are not saved by principles, but by a person – *this* man, the Virgin's Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law. If we are ever tempted to think that our ultimate allegiance is to some impersonal ideal, some philosophical concept or theological abstraction or political slogan, Mary is there to remind us that God has chosen to work in his world, not by inculcating principles, but by taking on flesh, in a particular place, at a particular time, when a particular woman accepted the astonishing invitation to be the God-bearer.

For that is what Mary always does. She points us to Jesus. If you look at the triptych, you will see that as glorious as Mary is, and as formidable as she appears, she is pointing most emphatically to Jesus. And this is the test, really, of whether our Marian devotion has gone astray. The moment that Mary, in our minds, becomes a figure in her own right – the moment she ceases to point to Jesus – we can be sure that we are no longer engaging with the real Mary, the Mary of Scripture, the Mary who told the servants at the wedding at Cana, “Do whatever he tells you.”

In this way, we could say that Mary is the first of the sacraments. In the sacraments, we believe, God takes ordinary created things – things that in themselves have no particular holiness or efficacy – and makes them the vehicles of his saving work. But there is this difference: that when God makes bread, or wine, or oil, or water an

instrument of his saving work, the created thing that he makes his instrument has no say in the matter. But Mary had her say – God had the audacity to entrust his saving work to her free response – and she said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” Before the Father Most High overshadowed her, before the Holy Spirit came upon her, before the eternal Word entered time and space and took human substance in her womb, she was given the dignity of becoming, by her own submission freely given, the first of the sacraments, the means by which salvation entered the world.

And as the first of the sacraments, she is the type or foreshadowing of the Sacrament of Sacraments, the Church: what William Porcher DuBose called “the sacrament of Christ’s wider incarnation, his Body.”

So, by all means, liken yourself unto the Virgin Mary. If you have been baptized into the Church, of which Mary is a type and foreshadowing, then God is ready to make of you, too, an instrument of his saving work. And every time he calls upon you to rebuke the proud whom he has scattered in the imagination of their hearts, you can say, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” And every time he calls upon you to acknowledge the humble and meek whom he has exalted, you can say, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” And every time he calls upon you to sustain the poor whom he has filled with good things, you can say, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”

Oh, yes. Liken yourself unto the Virgin Mary – be, like her, a vehicle by which the saving work of Christ is carried out, and let her point you, not to principles and slogans and catchphrases and abstractions, but to the one who left eternity for a particular time, and narrowed his all-encompassing presence into a particular place, taking human substance in her womb, so that he might offer himself for her salvation and for ours. And so to the blessed Son of the God-bearer, to our Lord Jesus Christ, with the Father Most High and the Quickening Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*