

The Blessed Virgin Mary

The discovery of a pregnancy can provoke a great variety of different reactions. There can be shock. There can be joy. There can be dismay. There can be relief. There can be unease. There can be quiet acceptance. The stories of Mary's pregnancy in Matthew's and Luke's gospels portray her and Joseph experiencing all of these emotions. In Luke's account there is initial shock, followed by joy. In the account given in today's gospel Joseph's first reaction was probably dismay. According to the narrative he resolves to break off their engagement quietly, perhaps harsh, but not so as to make a public spectacle of her. He then receives a message from God that the child has divine origins. He therefore comes to a quiet acceptance of what is to come. These stories and the subsequent accounts of the birth of Jesus have formed the narratives around our Christmas celebrations for many centuries. To what extent they have any factual historical foundation is, of course, open to consideration. I for one do not consider you have to believe in the virgin birth to be a Christian, but I am also loathe to discredit these narratives if they are important to you.

For many the role of Mary in the Christian story is of great importance and of all the saints she is regarded as the first and the foremost. Such an outlook has been held for many centuries and goes back to early Christianity. A large part of the reason for her supremacy among the saints is associated with the stories of the nativity of Jesus in the gospels. In Luke's nativity story her pregnancy is announced by the Angel Gabriel and both his words and her response are part of the explanation of how she came to be seen as so important. The angel greets her as highly favoured or full of grace. It may be that the latter translation of the Greek in the Latin Vulgate was influential in emphasising the importance and significance of Mary in the economy of salvation. If she is full of God's grace then she surely plays a vital role in the lives and the redemption of the faithful. At the end of the angel's announcement that she has been chosen to give birth to Jesus Mary gives her consent: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.' This humble acquiescence has been understood as her participation in the salvation event of Jesus Christ, without which it could not have occurred.

Staying with pregnancy and birth for the moment, the other important idea that has elevated Mary above all other saints is the concept of original sin. Because western Christianity at least came to believe that every human being coming into the world was already corrupted by the sin of Adam and Eve it was vital that Christ the redeemer should be free from it. Hence the virgin birth, or at least the understanding of the virgin conception of Jesus that arose in Latin Christianity. But if Jesus had to be free from original sin then surely his mother had to be as well. Hence the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary also, which was believed by many for centuries but firmed up as a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church in the middle of the nineteenth century. In part because of the church's obsession with sexual sin above all other, further attributes were added such as the notion that Mary is 'ever virgin'. A title for Mary which does sound very peculiar but which, if you believe that God became human in Jesus Christ, can be justified, is the expression 'Mother of God'. This is a translation of the Greek word Theotokos, literally meaning 'God-bearer' and was stoutly defended by orthodox Christians in the early years of the church.

Another idea about Mary is that she is a mediator (or mediatrix) between God and humanity. This is partly based on an understanding of her role in the birth of Jesus in which she is seen as the intermediary through which the Son of God entered the world. It is also rooted in the story of Jesus' turning water into wine, where Mary is represented as interceding with Jesus on behalf of the embarrassed hosts when the wine gave out. The belief is that it is her intercession or mediation with her son that brings about the miracle. The belief that she carries our prayers to Jesus is summed up in the classic Catholic epithet, 'Jesu mercy; Mary pray'. But this idea can be overstated and Protestants in particular have criticised it as undermining the unique mediatorial role of Christ. Some Catholics even go so far as to call Mary the 'mediatrix of all graces' meaning that all Christ's graces are imparted through Mary. In recent years the Roman Catholic Church has toned down some of these ideas and the Vatican has recently said the expression "Mediatrix of All Graces" can risk obscuring the revealed truth of Christ's sole mediation, leading to confusion.¹

An even more disputed Marian doctrine is the belief that Mary is Co-Redemptrix with Jesus. Essentially this title emphasises her co-operation with Jesus in the salvation event, especially the way she shares his suffering and is an instrument of divine grace. It is an understanding of Mary that has been held by some Roman Catholics since the middle ages. In some ways the expression ‘Our Lady’ can be understood in a similar way, for it is widely seen as equivalent to ‘Our Lord’ as applied to Jesus. The title ‘Our Lady’ does not, however, have to mean the same as Co-Redemptrix. Once again the Vatican has recently rowed back on this belief. In the recent Papal document, *Mater Populi Fidelis*, published earlier this year it is stated that that the expression Co-Redemptrix risks endangering the uniqueness of the redemption found in Jesus Christ.²

I believe it is ecumenically enormously encouraging that official Roman Catholic theologians are listening to voices within and without their own church asking them to reconsider some of the exaggerated ideas about Mary which have prevailed in time past. The work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on Marian beliefs and piety³ did much to forward convergence between Anglicans and Roman Catholics on this subject. In particular it emphasised Mary as a model of faith and obedience and affirmed the ancient title ‘Mother of God’ while at the same time stressing Christ’s unique role as redeemer and mediator. Divisions remain over the dogmas of Mary’s immaculate conception and her bodily assumption into heaven, the idea that Mary did not die but was taken up or assumed straight into heaven. We Anglicans are ourselves divided about the validity of invocation or prayer to Mary, though there is a very strong Anglican tradition which sees her as the foremost intercessor among Christian saints.

Apart from the details of Mariology about which I have been talking this morning, there are some who see the role of Mary in the life of the church as a corrective to the overly masculinist emphasis of the Christian religion. We believe in a father God and a redeeming son in a church, run, until recently, by a coterie of men. Some consider there is a great need for a feminine element within Christianity and that this is a good reason to give Mary an important place in our religion. Strictly speaking, I suppose, this

is not a theological defence for a high doctrine of Mary, but one can perhaps understand and sympathise with those who find the maternal figure of Mary a helpful element in their religious practice. At this time of year she certainly comes into the foreground in each and every form of Christianity and, whether or not we believe every detail of the stories of her pregnancy and Jesus' birth, we can be sure that, like all mothers, she, along with Joseph, played a key role in bringing her son into the world and forming him into the unique man that he became.

Joke: That's been quite a heavy theological sermon. So here's a joke to conclude and get us back into the Christmas spirit. Whether you get it or not may depend on whether you've been concentrating during my sermon:

Joseph and Mary are having breakfast. Mary puts down her coffee and says: "You know, Joe, at the end of my life, I'm going straight to Heaven!" Joseph looks up from his newspaper and replies: "That's quite an assumption, Mary."

¹ See *Mater Populi Fidelis. Doctrinal Note on Some Marian Titles Regarding Mary's Cooperation in the Work of Salvation* by The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Vatican City, Rome, 7th October 2025.

² See *ibid.*

³ See Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, London, 2004.