

Sermon for Advent 4 2020

*38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1 v 38*

The gospel reading today offers an opportunity to think about the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as she stands as a resolute model for all women. Over the years Mary has been both worshiped and condemned. She has been held up as the image of strong femininity, and, as the submissive servant. She has been offered as an alternative recipient of prayer when confronted with a patriarchal interpretation of the faith; and she has been at times, ignored. The cult of Mary worship has been very much a part of history. Mariolatry has generated an attitude of wariness of her name in some protestant circles.

A priest once mentioned to me that Mary was an important mother figure in the church because, after all, when we are afraid to approach our father we will often confide in our mother. This means that if we are afraid of God we can always pray to Mary. I am not convinced that this is an adequate understanding of the primary role that Mary offers in our faith.

I have great affection for Mary. I am an Associate Priest of the Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham, and in a previous parish always concluded the High Mass by reciting the Angelus.

In Faith I have always accepted Mary as the most important saint in the Christian church. She was approached by God, through his archangel Gabriel, to be the one who would give birth to our Lord Jesus. She would nurture him and raise him to maturity. She stood with him throughout his earthly ministry and she wept for him as he died upon the cross of crucifixion. While there is not much of her conversation recorded in scripture, we know that her presence with Jesus is noted and accepted. She is an extremely important part of the introduction, and of the ongoing faith of the church.

It is sad that in some areas of the church she has been so effectively pushed into the background of our understanding of the faith. Far too often she is spoken of as the essence of feminine subservience. "Seen and not heard", comes to mind. She is frequently presented as the one who is obedient to God, but who has little use beyond her virginity and childbirth. This has led to a teaching within the church that the woman must always be subservient to the man.

There is an area of the church that promotes this teaching in marriage. The wife is not to question. The wife is to be subservient. The wife is to be obedient. The man is the head of the household. This is a very dangerous teaching for it opens the way for domestic violence. More than this; it legitimises domestic violence.

One of the saddest things I heard when in Sydney was the account of a bride who had her wedding ring engraved with one word. And that word was SUBMIT. With that one word she gave away her identity, her independence of thought, and her safety.

Let us face it, Mary was not a wimp. Submissive to God maybe, but no wimp. She became pregnant outside of marriage when such behaviour was severely frowned upon. She did not keep her pregnancy a secret out of shame, but conversely declared it to the world. Mary did not succumb to the idea of being rejected by Joseph, but through faith involved him in the God-given task of raising Jesus.

When it was time for the census a very pregnant Mary walked and rode on a donkey for long periods of time to reach Bethlehem where Jesus was to be born. She did not complain about the fact that she did not get a private room in which to give birth, but settled into the Barn out the back. Jesus had no you beaut cot or pusher. He was placed in a manger, a trough from which the animals would normally feed.

She gave Jesus independence when he was child. We recall that when they departed from Jerusalem later in life they inadvertently left Jesus behind. When Jesus was chastised for staying behind, he simply reminded his mother that he was about his Father's business. Not Joseph's business, but God's business.

Mary went to the temple to request that Jesus come out to her when she thought him to be in danger. She walked with him and witnessed his miracles of healing and so much more. She was always mentioned with the other women who were early disciples of Jesus. Mary Magdalene was frequently her companion. Mary Magdalene, the one to first see the risen Jesus. She is the one who was sent by Jesus to tell the other disciples that Jesus was risen from the dead. Instead of promoting Mary Magdalene as an apostle she was labelled as a prostitute. In iconography while Mary the mother of Jesus is invariably written in a pure blue, Mary Magdalene is invariably written in red.

Sadly, history has always downplayed the role of the female disciples. This includes Mary the mother of our Lord. Instead of accepting this generalisation of Mary we need to see her as a trail blazer; as a woman of strength and conviction; Mary is a woman who has the capacity to encourage all women everywhere to live their lives as they believe they can be lived.

This is not permission to throw our lives away in sinful behaviour, but it is encouragement to live our lives in conjunction with our faith in God. Mary was given tremendous responsibility when she was asked to give birth to the Son of God. If she was a wimp she would have said, NO.

In our faith let us look to Mary as a role model of faith, strength and conviction. Mary was obedient to God, but she submitted to no man.