

Micah 5:2-5a
Magnificat
Hebrews 5:5-10
Luke 1:39-45

The Blessed Virgin

*For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,
was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.*

These words, which are pivotal to the Creed, were hammered out with great intensity in the first five centuries of the Christian era, but they present a challenge to modern minds because we have little mechanism for discussing the relationship between the human and the divine. There was a long and hard struggle to clarify the relationship between the two natures of Jesus, and many divisions developed as a result. The Church found it necessary to emphasise Jesus' humanity - to say that he was real flesh and blood: truly human. The Nestorians said Mary was the mother of the human Jesus, but not the mother of the divine person. In 431 Cyril of Alexandria declared Nestorius' doctrine of Jesus Christ heretical. Not that he stopped there. He developed 12 Anathemas against Nestorius, the first of which said: "If anyone does not confess Emmanuel is God in truth, and therefore that the holy virgin is the mother of God, let him be anathema." A theological issue at stake was how Jesus was the fully human and fully divine Son of God. A related issue was, how the role and status of Mary to be understood? The process of settling these questions resulted in the formation of the Nicene Creed, and had the effect of bringing Mary to the fore.

Mary's move from obscurity to the foreground is discernable in the New Testament. Paul and Mark, the earliest writings, make no mention of Mary by name. John, who does mention the "mother of Jesus", has no birth stories, while Matthew, who has an account of the nativity, nevertheless focuses on Joseph. Luke, whose Gospel comes later, has the richest tradition of nativity stories. Once regarded as extra material, the birth stories are central to his proclamation. In them Mary is not passive, but an active participant, far from the model of a compliant, acquiescent woman, obedient to God and man, as is so often claimed. In Luke Elizabeth calls Mary Blessed because of her obedience to God. She is also named as Blessed among women, and Blessed, for being the Mother of the Lord.

Amongst biblical scholars and theologians interest in Mary has grown in recent time, paralleling interest in the Trinity. As a consequence Protestants are turning their attention to a previously neglected area of study and reflection. Neglected because even though many of the sixteenth-century Reformers spoke of Mary with affection many fiercely opposed the excessive devotion to Mary that had grown up in the middle-ages. Today, as we reflect on Mary, I suggest we keep an eye on the face of John Knox in our window because he believed women should not rule. He was a strong opponent of Mary of Guise and Mary Tudor, and was vehemently opposed devotion to Mary the mother of the Lord.

Luke's account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth is very human and beautiful but its real purpose is proclamation. In this simple meeting of two women, the stage is being set for the declaration that God's promise is coming to fulfilment. Two women are pregnant. Elizabeth was aged and formerly barren, a motif which, from Sarah onwards, often figures in the Bible. And Mary is young and has not had children. Both births are human, and yet they are clearly **of God** who, as we have heard many times before, brings life where no life is expected. This is not about human capacity, it is about God who gives the gift of life, and safeguards it in the world. God has the capacity to raise up children of Abraham even from stones, and is now doing a new thing.

The New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne says Luke often brings two people together who have had a religious experience, which they only partly understand. Out of their shared experience full meaning grows. There is something here about what it means to be in the communion of the Holy Spirit. Mary's greeting, and the response of the baby in Elizabeth's womb, becomes a proclamation of the new and special thing God is doing. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth speaks like a prophet: *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, and why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?*

If we ever had any qualms about the Early Church's naming of Mary as the "mother of God/bearer" (Theotokos) we need look no further. Lord is the biblical word for God, and here Elizabeth names Mary as the "mother of my Lord". When the Council of Ephesus in 431 declared Mary to be "the mother of God" the intention was to signify that **one of us** became the instrument of the Word made flesh. It is not the case that God somehow squeezes himself into the narrow confines of humanity, like the gods of Olympus. But, as the history of Elizabeth and Mary shows, obedience has enabled God to change places. "Mother of God" signifies that from within humanity emerges one who will enable us to re-imagine and redefine who God is. Or as John puts it in his Gospel: What came into being in him was life, and that life was the light of all people.

Three times in the course of their meeting Elizabeth declares Mary *Blessed*. From this comes the title: the Blessed Virgin. A blessing is a word of power through which God, or one who is close to God, causes the effective descent upon the created world of all that God wants to give us: prosperity, joy, peace, wisdom, justice. God seeks to bless us, and for one of us to bless a person in God's name is to announce or impart the divine generosity to them. It is to name something that is on offer from God, and cannot be recalled because it is promised, and indeed, taking place. From Elizabeth's threefold use of Blessed we are right to understand that there has been a powerful and efficacious outgoing of God's will and grace towards Mary. Mary is full of grace because there is nothing we can see in her, or find in her, that singles her out as being especially worthy of this role. In the undeserved favour of God, she was chosen.

She is the beneficiary of a particular work of God that will bring good things to her and to the world. Mary is "full of grace" because she received the promise of God from Gabriel, believed it and accepted it. Her acceptance placed her in the way of God's gift. From then on she became God's servant, a partner in the new thing God was doing. Everything she does from now on is the same level as the will of God. This is something we say about Jesus, his Sonship consists in there being no difference between the will of God and what he does. He is full of grace and truth.

When it comes to being blessed by God, the circle of blessing is complete when we in turn bless God for all that we have received. Mary does just this in the Magnificat which follows her meeting with Elizabeth. She sings out of joy and praise because God

has favoured her and is using her in doing a new thing in the world. Her song, like Elizabeth's proclamation, is prophetic. It reveals how God is in the world. God is for us. God blesses the poor and the hungry, will exalt the disenfranchised and disregarded, and bring down the proud oppressors. Because of this it is not the great cities of Rome or New York which will shine forth, but Bethlehem, an out of the way town of insignificance, which becomes eternally imprinted on the psyche of the world. That God can do this, even when now that same town is apparently rendered impotent and meaningless by human conflict, becomes a word of comfort to us. And that word of comfort reaches us afresh in a week marked by the death of one such as Augusto Pinochet, one who exalted himself and crushed many of the poor.

In her song Mary speaks of the Justice of God in the past tense. God HAS raised up the poor. This is what God has done. It is God's action in choosing Mary, Elizabeth, and bringing to birth a new option for people of all nations. This is the good news we celebrate this season. Jesus is the reason for the season. And because of him we praise God for his faithful servants, Mary and Elizabeth. We give witness to their story. And continue to tell it to all nations, to the praise of God.