

Mother of Justice and Peace

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Assuming, of course, that we accept the tradition given to us in the church and take seriously the testimony of the gospels (and, in this context, particularly the Lucan testimony), we can say in a way that is not just poetical that Mary is truly the mother of justice and peace. For she is presented to us not only as giving witness to how God's power can transform humanity, but as, in doing this, giving birth to that power, that life. She becomes the Mother of Christ; the 'Mother of God', as Ephesus declared her to be. By her active and willing cooperation with the divine plan, by her humility, courage and love of justice, she brings Jesus into the world and thus gives birth to the Christ. She is the Mother of the New Age, the New Heaven and the New Earth, and shows herself prepared to risk everything to see Christ embodied for us and in us so that the kingdom of God may be established on this earth. Her prophetic witness to the truth is not just a witness to what can be, nor to what God's purposes might be in some future time; no, her witness makes the Truth present for us in such a way that reality becomes transformed by the mystery of God's power on this earth, implementing justice and peace.

God, in choosing Mary, demonstrates beyond all doubt that the Godhead acts most effectively through those whom the world despises; she is a woman, and therefore in the society of her time she is someone of no account; she is poor, and being poor and a woman she has no education and so is thought by the rabbis and priests to be incapable of understanding the Law of God. She lives in Nazareth, a small rural backwater despised by others even in Galilee: 'Can any good come out of that place?' asks Nathanael, whom Jesus describes as 'incapable of deceit' (Jn.2:46f.). Her life is typical of that of countless women throughout the ages; despised and marginalised, poor and without formal education, held in contempt by men, especially those wielding authority. It is a vivid demonstration of the truth that Paul expresses in 1 Corinthians: 'No, it was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning and to shame what is strong that he chose what is

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weak by human reckoning; those whom the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones God has chosen—those who are nothing at all to show up those who are everything' (1 Cor. 1:27f.), for Mary is, *par excellence*, of the 'poor' and 'lowly' of the beatitudes; one of the *anawim* who learn through their experience of poverty, oppression, hunger and injustice to trust in God and who are therefore people of faith—working with God to transform human society and human relationships.

Through Mary God can act. Her faith in God, her love of humanity, her passionate desire for justice, her mercy, her forgiveness of enemies, her endurance of persecution, bring her to a perfect co-operation with God. It is this that makes her ready to accept the power of God; to give birth to Jesus, to be the Mother of Emmanuel: God with us. Mary is not a simple bodily vessel for the nurture of Jesus; she is truly the Mother of Christ because through her active faith and love her mind is at one with the mind of God. She shows this by her complete identification with the oppressed, with the *anawim*: the poor of God, and with their hopes of liberation in the New Age. Moreover, because she is poor—and a woman—she experiences the powerlessness, poverty and suffering of women without wealth, status or education who, in addition to their other oppressions, are also expected to accept and submit to the age-old oppression of women. It is because Mary is of the *anawim* in a way unique to women that she can become, through the Spirit, the Mother of the new people of God. In the way that God has of overturning human values, that for which she has been despised—namely her womanhood—becomes essential in her unique contribution to the divine plan for humanity which is the reason for all generations calling this despised woman 'blessed' (Lk.1:48).

Luke puts into Mary's mouth the words of the Magnificat: that magnificent song of liberation. This tells us how Mary was seen by the early Church, what her co-operation with the Spirit meant to the early Christians. They saw her as the harbinger of the New Age in which the old oppression and injustice will be swept away. In the Magnificat Mary sings of the coming of the Kingdom using the words of Hannah, the prophetess of the Old Testament. We are reminded that the promises of God to those who are faithful are immutable and that the time has come when these promises will begin to be fulfilled. The Magnificat gives us a programme of action which will implement the coming of the Kingdom of God. This song of Mary looks back in triumph to the liberation of Exodus and forward to the even greater glory of the New Age. Its sentiments are very close to the passage in Isaiah quoted by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry: 'The Spirit of the Lord has been given me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the

downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.' (Lk.4:18—22) Both passages are clear examples of what has been called 'reversal theology'.¹ Both celebrate the power of God which overturns entrenched power and defeats oppression and misery.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my Saviour are the opening words of the Magnificat: noble, powerful words. Mary is frequently presented as the model of humility; what these words do is remind us that her humility was never used as an excuse for pusillanimity and that her whole life was devoted to the glory of Yahweh, the God of justice and defender of the poor. Her glory does not depend upon social status, nor is it found in conforming to the prejudices of men, but in proclaiming the greatness of God and the transcendent reality of divine justice and mercy. Her humility is not a humility of servile acquiescence nor of cowardly self-denigration, but a humility in which she knows that all things will be possible to her and her people, the *anawim*, because they are possible to her God.

Blessed are the lowly: they shall have the earth for their heritage', Jesus tells us in the beatitudes (Mt.5:4). The *anawim*, the people of God, 'the lowly', are happy at the proclamation of the New Age because it is the time of their deliverance and the ending of oppression. Mary, the voice and mother of all the *anawim*, trusts in God to show divine power and intervene in history to achieve the divine purpose through the faith and activity of those who are obedient to the call to work with the power of the Spirit. She speaks for those who, knowing themselves to be without power, look for power from God and are given it when they open themselves in love and solidarity to the divine within their neighbour. All those who have trusted in this way: who have struggled to create community and co-operation, especially within situations of oppression and lies, know the happiness that comes when they discover that they are not alone, nor are they powerless, nor are they defeated as long as they have hope and one another. So Mary can, in truth, exult because God has looked *on his lowly handmaid* but she continues: *Yes, from this day forward all generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name and his mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him: God makes history by enabling the powerless to act.*

In truth it is a Christian insight, which was well understood by the early church, if not so well by later generations, that the real history of mankind is made by the exploited and oppressed. Change is brought about by those who desire an end to alienation and division, hunger and injustice, poverty and persecution; it is not brought about by those who are committed to the status quo and their position within it. God's plan is to bring to an end all present systems of power and privilege and even God cannot do this through those who wish to keep their wealth and

their standing: God can only work in and through those who have no power but the power of human solidarity and no privilege save that of beings instruments of God and divine justice, entrusted with the mysteries of the regeneration of humanity. These mysteries are not those of a separate cult but of God's activity within the world, brought about through human co-operation, effort and sacrifice; the 'synergy' of the human and the divine. Mary is blessed, because she represents all those on whom the mercy of God will rest and in the operation of that mercy she has her own essential contribution to make.

The hebrew word for mercy, *chesdh*, is always used in the context of God's solidarity with us: God's faithfulness and the love that is sworn to us; the re-affirmation of the covenant.² In many of the old litanies of both the eastern and western churches, Mary is described as the 'ark of the covenant'; she embodies in herself the revelation of God's commitment to humanity, especially suffering, oppressed humanity. She is not a simple physical vessel housing God's presence; in the new dispensation, the ark of the covenant is a living breathing woman of courage and integrity, hope and vision, purity and commitment. Her selfless vision remains a profound challenge to our human greed and myopic egotism. But God is compassionate and long-suffering, God remains faithful to us in spite of our injustice, our pursuit of evil, our ruthless oppression of one another; divine solidarity is not an act of condescension but an act of identification with us undertaken from love and loyalty. This is a love that leads to anguish, to an acceptance of the full gamut of human suffering. Like a comrade, a friend, a brother, a sister, a wife, a husband, God shares our life, our burdens: shares our death. The covenant that is made is one of total divine commitment but it demands of us that we commit ourselves to one another. Those who stand in faithful community and solidarity with others are expressing what is divine in themselves whether they know it or not.

But the mercy of God makes no compromise with injustice even while it shows mercy to unjust men. *He has shown the power of his arm, he has routed the proud of heart, He has pulled princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly*, Mary sings in the Magnificat. For how can the people of God: the powerless, the silenced, the marginalised, come into their inheritance unless 'princes' are brought down? It matters not upon what basis such 'princes' may have built their power; in so far as it rests upon the enforced powerlessness and alienation of the people it is a power that stands against the power of God.

John the Baptist, when he is announcing the coming of the kingdom of God, also describes its appearance in terms of a reversal of the existing order: 'every valley will be filled in and every mountain and hill laid low' (Lk.3:5). Just as the earlier prophets did, the Baptist preaches that the

kingdom of God demands the eradication of injustice and false power: 'The axe is laid to the roots of the trees' (Lk.3:9) for the old rotten order must be cleared away and the dead wood cut out, while the ground is prepared for the new planting. But in Luke's gospel it is Mary, not John, who first proclaims the divine overturning of unjust human power. The voice of the woman prophet, long-silenced, is 'heard once again in the land' singing of God's justice and the life of the New Age. 'The winter is past' and the 'flowers have come', so the divine bridegroom calls on his beloved to sing the songs of hope and happiness:

let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet
and your face beautiful.

(The Song of Songs 2:10—14)

We can be certain that Mary was seen, by those 'who thought themselves wise', not as a prophet but as one of the *am-aretz*, the 'unlearned'. 'May they be accursed' is how some of the rabbis described the countryfolk.³ Other rabbis were less harsh and unwilling to go so far but were shocked by the 'subversive' views circulating among the *am-aretz*. 'The *am-aretz* says: what is mine is thine and what is thine is mine. Such a person seems a muddler and stupid'. In contrast, the men of scholarship, versed, they thought, in the Law of God, felt that a wise man would say: what is mine is mine and what is thine is thine, while a holy man would say: what is mine is thine and what is thine is thine.⁴ The wise maintained the principle of private property and the holy, while accepting the principle, advocated and practised charity. Only the ignorant and foolish, the rabbis thought, would preach a complete reversal of the existing order and advocate common ownership. The views of the vast majority of the rabbis stand in stark contrast to the vision of the Magnificat; a vision of someone who is one of the most despised of the *am-aretz*, for not only is she poor, unlearned, provincial, but, most reprehensible of all, in the view of the religious authorities, she is a woman, and, as such, deemed to be without insight, knowledge, or judgement, only fit for work in the home and the fields, for sexual intercourse and childbearing. But it is this despised woman, held in contempt by the religious authorities, who is, for us, the Mother of God, the Mother of Christ. Not because she stands apart from all other women but because she stands in solidarity with them; and with their children, brothers, husbands and fathers.

Even now, among those who are Christians, who are, they say, committed to the cause of justice, there are those who despise women; who wish to marginalise them; who believe they have no right to a voice within the community of the church; who wish to maintain the old oppressions and brutalities. But what can the Mother of God have to say to us if we refuse to open our hearts to the truth that 'you have clothed yourselves in

Christ and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:27—8). It is not possible to resist oppression and to work for a society in which exploitation and injustice are eradicated if women are excluded from their God-given place at the banquet of the New Age. The progress of the whole of humanity is inextricably linked with improvements in the lot of women. It is not possible to raise standards of health and education, transform property relations, safeguard human rights and move to a more humanistic culture if the centuries-old attitudes to women are not repudiated. But can we say at the moment that it is from within the Christian communities that the poorest of the world—brutalised, marginalised, silenced women—receive divine hope of deliverance and the establishment of a new order on this earth? How is this aspect of the Good News preached to women? What comfort are they given when they look at the practice of the churches, where women are, for the most part, without a voice and marginalised?

We have been called to the banquet of Jesus Christ, where the *hungry have been filled with good things while the rich sent empty away*, as Mary reminds us. But we also know that those of us who are called to the feast prepared before all ages must 'clean the inside of the cup and the dish' (Mt. 23:23) and see that we are wearing 'the wedding garment', otherwise we shall be cast out into outer darkness. (Mt. 22:12—13) If we look for God where God is not; if we stay where God is not, in injustice and alienation, in false superiority and unthinking brutality, then we shall remain with a profound hunger because we shall be worshipping the god of our own imaginings and not the true God made flesh who was born of Mary. God forbid that we should remain unaware of our dehumanising deprivation and hunger. The Spirit can only feed us if we recognise our hunger and need. But, as Jesus tells us: 'Seek and you shall find' (Lk. 11:9), so we know if we seek for real human relationships not only between men and men but also between men and women we shall find God, for 'to know God is to do justice'.⁵ The new life proclaimed by Mary is one for the whole of humanity: women as well as men; girls as well as boys. Unless that is recognised there will be no new life. But Mary had faith that humanity could and would listen to the message of the Good News and so must we have faith in God and one another.

Mary is a true daughter of Abraham because she is a woman of faith. She sings in the Magnificat of the promise made to him by God: *He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of his mercy — according to the promise he made to our ancestors — of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.* (Lk. 1:54—5) To work for justice is to travel along the way where we meet Jesus; there is no other way to meet him. The way is a way of faith; to commit oneself to work for justice, so seek it out and to make it manifest so that the whole of creation might be

transformed is to live a life of faith. 'Since God had promised it, Abraham had refused either to deny it or even doubt it, but drew strength from faith and gave glory to God, convinced that God had power to do what he promised. This was the faith that was considered justifying him.' (Rom. 4:20—22) To affirm hope in the future, in the action of God in history, in the possibility of human regeneration, in the coming of the New Age, is to live by faith. 'Faith is the highest passion' says Kierkegaard⁶ and indeed one might argue that it is the foundation of all true passion, all deep commitment, all love. This is the faith that expresses itself in life, that brings forth life, and that life is eternal.

Mary is blessed because she has the divine thirst for what is just and faith that it will be brought about. She is not blessed simply because she gave birth to Jesus physically. The woman in the crowd who lifts up her voice to praise Mary: 'Blessed is the womb that bore thee and the paps that gave thee suck' (Lk. 11:27) is expressing the common attitude that a woman's only value lies in her capacity for childbearing and producing worthy sons. Jesus corrects her: 'Nay, rather, blessed is that one who hears the word of God and keeps it', for he wishes to stress those qualities that Mary had in abundance and which engender happiness both for women and men.

Traditionally Mary has been seen as 'the hidden one': the woman who remained at home in Nazareth while Jesus conducted his public ministry. She is seen as the woman of prayer, who of necessity withdraws from public affairs and leads a life of humility, abnegation and silence. Women are invited to withdraw behind the enclosure the more closely to emulate her, women within the home are exhorted to follow her example and leave public ministry to men. Mary is presented as the model for the traditional role allotted to women in most, if not all, the Christian churches: a role of submissive patience, silent humility, chaste withdrawal. This is an interpretation of the life of Mary which has been preached to women by men, but not practised by men, who have used their leadership in the public ministry to demand of women conformity to a model they do not accept for their own lives. It is argued that men are called upon to follow Jesus in his public ministry and that women are called upon to follow Mary in her 'hidden life'. Those of us women who are engaged in work to try to end various forms of injustice and oppression, including, may it be said, the subjugation of women, find it well nigh impossible to relate to the interpretation of Mary's life that attempts to legitimate traditional discrimination against women and the punitive restrictions under which they are placed. The rejection of such distortions of Mary's truth is not, of course, a rejection of Mary.

At crucial times in the life of Jesus, Mary is found, not in the relative safety and seclusion of her own home but brutally exposed to public opprobrium, humiliation and danger. Hers is not a life of quiet peace and

undisturbed order. Mary is called a prophet, not only because she witnesses to God's power in the world, but also because she is prepared to risk everything, including life itself, to see that that power is, in fact, made manifest; embodied for us.

There may be at times a tendency towards sentimentality in our attitudes to Mary's acceptance of God's plan: her *fiat*. But Mary knew, even though male commentators rarely make this clear, that what was being offered contained the possibility of her disgrace and her possible death. Even today, twenty centuries later, in certain parts of the world unmarried women who are found with child may be put to death and some, in fact, are. Mary knew that if Joseph repudiated her she could be, according to the law, stoned at the door of her father's house. When she assented to God's invitation she accepted that possible consequence. She had no guarantee for her own safety. The only assurance she was given was that her child would be the instrument of God's plan and that she herself would be called blessed by future generations. The act of faith that she makes in God's promise is not a passive acquiescence but a courageous act of commitment. She risks her reputation and her very life in the hope of being able to help establish God's kingdom.

Mary is present at the birth of the new community at Pentecost, when the truth of the eucharistic celebration and the sacrifice of Calvary becomes a reality for the early Christians. The descent of the Holy Spirit is preceded by fervent communal prayer: 'All those joined in continuous prayer together with several women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus.' (Acts 1:14) It is through the power of the Spirit and in the company of Mary that the early Christians are able to rid themselves of their fear and to give what is without doubt the most striking sign of the community living by the life of the Risen Lord: the common life of *agape*. 'The whole group of believers were united heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything he had, as everything they owned was held in common.' (Acts 4:31—32) Peter, in speaking of what has happened, proclaims that this is the sign that the prophet Joel spoke about: 'In the days to come—it is the Lord who speaks—I will pour out my spirit on all mankind. Even on my slaves, men and women, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.' (Acts: 2:17—18) The community of the saints at Jerusalem is based upon the hope of the New Age when the present unjust human societies will be ended.

In the early Church, especially in the Syriac tradition, the Holy Spirit was often referred to as 'mother', as Robert Murray S.J. has so clearly shown.⁷ During the baptismal invocations the Syriac Church called on the Spirit: 'Come compassionate Mother, come communion of the blessing' and the Macarian homilist mourning over the fallen state of humanity cries: 'They did not look on the true, heavenly Father; nor the good, kind Mother, the grace of the Spirit, nor the sweet longed-for Brother, the Lord.'⁸ In the

Judaic tradition the Spirit is described using feminine imagery, as is the divine wisdom and the *shekinah*: the presence and glory of God.⁹ We see this occurring time and time again in the Wisdom literature (cf. Wisdom 7:22—8:20, 10:9—21). The theological language of Judaism was, no doubt, influenced and circumscribed by the prevailing patriarchal attitudes, but even here there was an irresistible desire to attribute ‘feminine’ characteristics to the deity and so move closer to an understanding of God as Trinity, where, within the life of the three persons, there is no domination imposed by one over the others, but only an equal and reciprocal gift by each of the persons themselves to the others; a reality which should be reflected in the relations between human beings, including the relations between women and men.

It has long been accepted that the Spirit is, in some sense, associated with the immanence of the Godhead, just as the Father is associated with transcendence and the Son with manifestation. Many Christians, especially, I would suggest, women, find it both helpful and appropriate to think of the ‘immanent’ Spirit using feminine imagery. The Spirit is then seen as an immanent ‘feminine’ enabling power; the conception of Jesus is seen in a new way; we rid ourselves of the unhelpful images of Greek and Roman mythologies redolent of divine matings with mortal women and instead we begin to see how the virgin Mary, by her willing co-operation with the God immanent within her, the source of all life and holiness, gives birth to God manifest in the world. Mary gives birth to the work of the Spirit. In that she becomes a model for all Christians, regardless of whether they be male or female. Only a woman could have been the mother of Jesus, but we are all called to be the mother of Christ: to bring forth Christ to the world; Christ who is the saving power of God transforming all humanity.

‘The Spirit and the Bride say “Come”’. Let everyone who listens answer “Come”. Then let all who are thirsty come; all who want it may have the water of life and have it free.’ (Rev. 22:17) Mary, as the mother of God, brings to birth the new life for humanity, she calls on all of us, through the divine Spirit, to become Mothers of Christ and to labour together to bring forth the New Age. For the gift of God which satisfies our deepest longings for peace, justice, holiness and loving community is the life of God born in us and through us by the Power of the Spirit: God made manifest.

1 viz. G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. Orbis.

2 W. Barclay, *The Plain Man looks at the Beatitudes*. Fontana. p. 57.

3 B. Häring, *The Beatitudes: their personal and social implications*. St. Paul’s Publications. p. 19.

4 C.G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Teaching and the Gospel of Jesus*. Macmillan. p. 9

5 G. Gutierrez op. cit. p. 205.

6 S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling & Sickness unto Death*. Princeton. p. 131.

7 Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*. Cambridge.

8 *ibid.* pp. 316, 318.