

Identity and Connectedness: Mary in a Social Media Age

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Evensong at St Paul's, Manuka, Sunday 18 August 2019

Psalm 72; Song of Songs 2: 8-14; Acts 1: 1-14

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

It's good to be here at St Paul's, and in this pulpit where I used to hold forth back in the day. Thank you to Fr Ben for his welcome invitation.

Tonight I want to talk to you about the Blessed Virgin Mary, and what Mary means for the Catholic imagination, in terms of finding identity and connectedness in life. But I'm going to come at it the long way round, by first talking about identity and connectedness in this age of social media and the smart phone, by way of comparison.

For the last decade or so, social media and the smart phone have come to dominate people's sense of identity and connectedness all around the world. The smart phone is of course the Swiss Army knife of human connectedness: it's scarcely a phone at all, but a universal connectedness tool. It gives us apps for every form of human connectedness, from renting public access bikes and scooters to banking to transacting our sex lives. "You realize how much things have changed," said one comedian, "when the first thing young men reach for when they wake up is their phone."

And of course your smartphone is the main vector of today's social media world. Here people increasingly find their identity and their connectedness, with prominent role models on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter—from chic and shapely young influencers to flamboyantly contrarian presidents. Families connect across the generations on social media, while individuals find a niche identity there in the way they listen, watch, shop, form opinions and dream. Social media is reinventing politics, too, bringing unprecedented scrutiny as well as fresh opportunities for our leaders, while for the masses it's a powerful tool for subversion and mobilisation. We first saw this in the Arab spring while more recently it's enabling nimble, fast-moving protestors to keep one step ahead of Hong Kong authorities.

In an age marked by secularity and individualism, the identity and connectedness mediated by social media and its sacrament, the smartphone, represents a new universal public religion of sorts, a new *Catholica*. But for everything Catholic, there's a reaction of protest, a

Protestantism if you like, and regarding the virtual religion of social media and the smartphone, I'm a protestant through and through.

I belong to that small group of sceptics who have nothing to do with social media and who don't own a smartphone. I lament the way all this replaces the incarnational reality of flesh and blood relationships with the Gnosticism of virtual reality. I lament its hypermimetic quality, too, fostering an ersatz individualism that's really just living in the desires of others. I lament how social media weaponizes male rage, while demeaning and hurting and disempowering women and girls. I lament the way it robs us of intelligence and of perspective, too. It undermines traditional curated media. It kills any inclination towards a life of serious reading among young people, along with a capacity for enjoying quiet solitude, and hence of developing any sort of inner life. For me, social media represents a perversion of identity and connectedness; it maroons us in what we might call an echo chamber of the vanities.

Now you'll clearly agree that this is an extreme position, and it's very likely that you'll want nothing to do with it. The unified imagination of this new *Catholica* is now very compelling, so that all such concerns of social media protestants like me are typically dismissed without further thought.

Now let's shift gear, and think about the genuine *Catholica*, the authentic Christian imagination with the identity and connectedness that it entails. And here the Blessed Virgin comes into her own. She is the loving face, the still icon, the vector of a whole worldview, a whole identity, a whole connectedness, which has taken hold of history through Jesus Christ. Now we know that God is not distant and that being human is not a spiritual liability. Now we know that God is near and invested, incarnate and intra-historical, or if you like God is transcendent in a way that brings God equally near to all of us and to all the dimensions of our being human, save for sin. Now we know that our lives are held firm in God's embrace through all the flux of change and chance, through the deep waters of death and on to the spacious, endlessly and richly human life that is heaven. All this is made real and personal in our baptism, and celebrated in the great Eucharistic feast of liberated identity and joyful connectedness— connectedness to God the Father, through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit; connectedness to each other and to the matter of creation, and connectedness to a healing future that displaces and defeats every accursed past.

And, friends, as Catholic-minded Christians come to indwell these imaginative delights, they find Mary before their eyes, in their hearts and their prayers, and by their sides in all the joyful and all the sorrowful mysteries of life, through the grace of her son Jesus. In Catholic and Orthodox cultures, Mary is always before us in pictures, icons and statuary, in place names, and in the prayers that arise from all those places. She represents a world caught up and transfigured and glorified by her son. She represents the Church and indeed there she

was, at the end of tonight's Acts reading, standing prominent among the foundational members of this New Testament reality. Thanks to Mary the whole Old Testament has been mined for resonances, too, as in tonight's set reading from the Song of Songs with its cherished and adored figure of a woman, who has long been associated with Mary in the Christian imagination.

So Mary's story becomes a vignette of Israel's whole salvation history. I was reflecting on this while standing in that precious Renaissance jewel, the Scrovegni Chapel—in Padua in Italy, a few weeks back—tracing that story of salvation around the chapel walls in the beautiful frescos of Giotto. Instead of that story beginning with Adam and Eve, or Noah's ark, or Abraham and Isaac, or Job, as is often the case in ancient Christian iconography, here the story of salvation begins with the parents of Mary, who tradition names as Joachim and Anna, who hand on the faith of Israel to Mary—as she no doubt handed it on to Jesus.

My point here is that Mary isn't an aberration or an add on, but her story and her ministry is a fruit of the Gospel and a lens into its deepest meaning. Mary is the human face of a humanity caught up in the grace of her Son, in the Spirit of God—their Father and ours.

So the story of Mary isn't limited to the story of an individual who Protestants notice at Christmas but who they otherwise might never spare a thought for. The story of Mary isn't a distraction from the importance of Jesus, either, as Protestants often fear. But, rightly understood, Mary is part of how the Church orchestrates and fills out the Jesus theme, from the time of Scripture on.

Remember, after all, how Mary is prominent in the New Testament as a witness to Jesus. She's the face of faithful Israel into which the infant Jesus first gazed. She elicits from Jesus his first miracle at the Cana wedding, according to John, and ever since Christians have looked to Mary for support as they pray to her Son. And Mary stands at the consummation of all things according to the New Testament, as that woman in the Book of Revelation clothed with the sun and crowned with twelve stars, so that Christians ever since have felt free to imagine Mary sharing in the glory of her risen son, assumed into heaven and crowned there. It's interesting, then, that Catholics and Orthodox look to the New Testament in support of their most un-Protestant instincts about Mary.

But not only Protestants have issues with Mary. Feminists have rightly pointed out that obedience and submission are not unalloyed goods, especially in light of so much patriarchal violence. Likewise, it's been pointed out that Mary is hardly an obvious role model for real women who can't be both virgins and mothers. But Mary shows a more radical, less tame and conventional face in her Magnificat, with its casting down of the proud, and its exaltation of the humble and meek. Her virginal conceiving of Jesus isn't primitive obstetrics so much as radical theology, with Jesus emerging from a place other than one tainted by

male control and violence. The miracle stories regarding Mary, both in the New Testament and up to our present day, are not meant to poke scientifically minded people like me in the eye but, instead, they're best understood as imaginative testimonies to an identity and connectedness beyond the power of this sinful world to undermine, to pervert, and to spoil.

Friends, my point tonight is that Mary stands at the imaginative heart of a certain Christian vision, of a Catholic vision. She stands as a vector of identity and connectedness, as well as an icon of God's tenderness. If like me you grew up with parents who weren't particularly loving toward you or interested in you, then Mary can help remind you through art, music, and in your prayers and that you are loved by God, that your identity is rooted and grounded in God, that you are profoundly connected through God's embrace of an otherwise disconnected world. And all this through Jesus, who Mary knows and loves best, and who helps us to know and love him.

Now, if all this talk of the Catholic imagination and Mary at its heart is a bit much for you, then remember today's main popular alternative in this post-Protestant, often militantly secular world, with its virtual religion of social media and the smartphone. If you think that Mary and the Catholic imagination is too much, look at the alternative we're more than happy with.

And so will you pray with me, +in the Name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit? *Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. AMEN.*