

Sermon; St Philip's O'Connor

Mary, Mother of our Lord 14th August 2005 Rebecca Newland

Readings:

Isaiah 61:10—62:3

Psalm 113 — page 365 OR Song of Mary p.31

Galatians 4.4-7

Luke 2.1-7

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Celebration of Mary

We matter and how we respond matters

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you now and always,
Amen

Today is a day to remember Mary, the mother of our Lord. Way back before I became a good Protestant I was actually brought up Catholic and I have lots of Mary stories. Here are a couple...

As a little girl of about 8 or 10 I belonged to the Legion of Mary. We met once a week on Wednesday. We knelt around a table with Sister Philomena and prayed the rosary. We prayed for the poor and needy and went to visit children in hospital. I also had a little statue of Mary, about this high. It was made out of that glow the dark stuff. When I turned my light off at night my little Mary would emit an unearthly green glow. I have to tell you though it was quite comforting. And then there was the life size statue of Mary in the church. She was tall and stately, with head bowed. She stood on a globe of the world. Wrapped around the globe was a snake and Mary's foot was crushing its head. Here was Eve triumphing over Satan

These stories I carry around with me about Mary are wonderful and very powerful. Stories shape us and guide us in all sorts of ways. We live with stories all the time — news stories, family stories, world stories. The story we seem to live with at the moment is about a world that seems to have gone out of control. When I was at Central station in Sydney recently I noticed that sniffer dogs were going to be introduced. It was all part of the "war on terrorism". This climate of fear was unheard of not so very long ago. Our future is uncertain and fear laden. We spend enormous amounts and spend energy on protecting our way of life. None of this is new. There really is nothing new under the sun. The technology might be different but the fear, the greed, the despair and violence are all too common and ancient. These are old, old stories.

Now in the Christian faith we have our own story — the Bible. It is a book full of stories — so many it takes your breath away. I love the way little kids get stories of the bible wrong. Like the little boy who said that Jesus said do one to others before they do one to you or that St. Paul cavorted to Christianity or that Solomon had 300 wives and 700 porcupines. The bible is full of possibilities! The bible is not science and it doesn't pretend to be but it does tell us some amazing things — the story of God's love for creation and us. It tells the story of how God lovingly reaches out to human beings and eventually becomes one of them. That is the message of the reading from Galatians. In the fullness of time, when the time was right, God sends the son, Jesus, to be born of a woman, to become human to show humans a new, free and living way to live, to die and live for each of us.

The Bible also tells us stories about the nature of human beings — what motivates them, the depths to which they can sink, the heights they can obtain. The Bible mirrors back to us our greatest fears and our deepest longings. Importantly for us the Bible tells us the story that we matter — each and every one of us. We matter to God and we matter to each other and to creation. Everything we do, every smile on our face, every dream and hope, every act of kindness or act of malice matters.

The story of Mary is about a person who looked on the surface as if she didn't matter at all. She was an unmarried, young, Jewish girl for a start, a person with no social rights. She is a person with no power, no education and very importantly, no husband. (If I was Rob I'd make some joke about marriage here!) But back to Mary — she lived at a time when her country was occupied by the powerful Roman Empire. In her world there was political and social unrest, and the future was very uncertain. And this is the person God chooses to bring forth the Christ, to bear the baby Jesus. This insignificant person is singled out by God to do one of the most important tasks in history. In a very real way we too are called upon to bring forth Christ in the world, to be Christ bearers. As Christians we bring the love of Christ to those around us. That is the beauty and challenge of our baptismal promises — "Shine as a light in the world". No matter how dark it is, no matter what fears lurk, no matter if it seems hopeless then we keep shining; keep being everything God has made us to be.

We can look at Mary to see that the most unlikely people matter — that we matter, in the great story of life. We are players in the great drama of life and we all have a call, a task, a role, which furthers God's story.

But we can also look to Mary to learn that how we respond to God, our attitude, matters as well. How we play our part makes a difference. On days when we celebrate Mary we often say or sing the Magnificat, Mary's wonderful song of praise to God. It is a song that resonates with praise, trust, and gratitude for God's goodness. In the Gospel reading we heard about the birth of Jesus but in the time frame of the Gospel the Magnificat happens before the birth of Jesus. According to Luke, Mary bursts forth with praise, trust and gratitude, before she has any idea what sort of little boy she was going to have to deal with, before she really understood what was before her and her son, before Jesus has lived and died and brought such hope to others.

Perhaps it was just the euphoria of a young expectant mother but I prefer to see it as the story of a person of no account, who could see the greatness and love of God, who despite what was ahead of them, what dangers and fears they faced, could declare passionately the glory of God. Who could express heartfelt gratitude for the gift and promise of life and then live it to the full — all its joy and pain — and love deeply throughout it all.

Does this matter — Praising God and having gratitude and trust in God's goodness? You bet they do. Kids at Radford College where I work as a chaplain ask all sorts of questions about God and faith. The other chaplains and I answer as best we can but we tell the kids that ultimately they need to give it a go — to see if it makes any difference, to see what the fuss is all about. William Blake wrote "Gratitude is heaven itself". So I challenge us all to give it a go — in everything we are confronted with, good and bad — and see whether in the process of being thankful for everything heaven meets you. Does trust make a difference? Hans Kung the world famous dissident theologian said that trust in God was the fundamental principle that meant he could face all storms and difficulties. It freed him to embrace life. So I challenge us all to trust the Lord when it seems hopeless, when there is no earthly reason to do so — and see whether courage comes to us and carries us through. Does praising God matter? Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, said that the whole purpose of a human being's life was to praise God. That was their beginning and their end. I challenge us all to praise God in everything we do and say, to make God the centre of our lives — and see whether all else falls into place.

As I tell my students, virtues like praising God, trust and gratitude cannot grow in us unless we practice them. All of you are old and wise enough to know that all too well.

So we remember Mary today, not just because she was the mother of Jesus but because her life tells us something important about ourselves, that we matter, that even if we think we are insignificant or of little account we do have part to play in God's story. We remember Mary also, because the way she responded to God shows us that praise of God, trust and gratitude, make a difference in our lives and in the lives of those around us. These qualities matter. In Mary they helped her to be the mother of Jesus throughout his life, from birth to death. They enabled her to bring Christ into the world. They led her through all the joy and all the suffering, the road of her life. They can be part of our journey and our purpose as well.

Amen.