

Mary: her life and ours

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Mary, Mother of our Lord, Year C, 14 August 2022

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Isaiah 71.10–62.3; The Magnificat, 1:47-55 Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:32-40

This past week having conducted two funerals and grieved and reminisced with families and friends I have found myself doing some of my own reminiscing; perhaps it has something to do with getting older, but I am finding myself doing this more often. I think what is happening is that I am becoming more aware of the importance of people and events that have been part of my formation, particularly those who have died.

In January 2018 while Susan and I were visiting family in the UK we had a break in Paris and visited the Louvre. Whilst roaming the endless galleries we stumbled upon the painting on the front cover of today's pew sheet: *Madonna with child with St Rose and St Catherine*, by Pietro Perugino and Andrea Aloigi.

I had gazed upon this picture countless times as it hangs above the high altar in the family's parish church. To find the original was a revelation. Just before Lent in the 1970s the Vicar decided that the picture needed to be covered as part of the Lenten array. It is up very high and clearly none of the wardens were prepared to scale the ladder, so the Vicar went up, probably in a cassock. Of course, the ladder moved and he ended up putting a huge hole in the canvas which remained there for many years!

In the Lady Chapel of the same church, the window behind the altar features a scene of Our Lady from the book of Revelation:

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.

In that stained glass window the moon under her feet was a yellow, crescent moon and this vision was always known by us as 'Our Lady of the Banana.'

What has got to do with anything? Well, what I am describing to you, is the place that Mary had with in the religion of my upbringing. She was no plaster saint, no heavenly being, but a person very much part of our world. A world which, yes, includes the accidental and comic. She was the one saint who really showed us the way. Despite the disadvantage of age, gender, marital status, despite the doubt and initial misgivings—how can this be, and probably a raft of other impediments, she was the chosen one. And following the birth of Jesus—despite the fear of Herod's massacre and the flight into Egypt as a refugee, despite the warning of the old priest Simeon, which must have remained with her as she watched her son on his journey which would lead inevitably to the cross—she was the one who showed the way of prayerful resilience and dedication. For all these reasons, and more, these are why she remains significant for us today, perhaps more so than ever. To see Mary in isolation, as a person set aside, as being somehow distant from us and from the world, is to misunderstand her place in our lives of faith.

Whilst the teenage me was being amused by the vicar ruining a great master and pondering on our Lady of the Banana, I was also falling in love, well I thought I was, with Olivia Newton-John. My bedroom was something of a shrine to Olivia, this was the age of the transistor radio, the Top Ten and saving up for the latest LPs. The news of her death this week has caused me to reminisce and to recall the teenage me. At that time, it seemed to me

that Olivia had the ability to seem completely ordinary, accessible, humble and yet, to a teenage male, almost divine! When she sang ‘Hopelessly devoted to you,’ I was convinced she was talking to me! She was ubiquitous for us in the seventies, on various TV shows and on the radio, ever present.

Now, let me say, I am not seeking to canonise Olivia. What I am trying to say is that this sense of the ordinary, the accessible, the humble, that the teenage me felt then, is what we should see and find in the Blessed Virgin Mary now. The Reformers were critical of the emphasis the Church placed on Mary: ‘There are so many ladies’ they wrote, ‘our lady of this and our lady of that!’ The Welsh writer and poet, David Jones wrote ‘she’s a rare one for locality.’ But perhaps this is what Mary is all about. When I visited recently my grandparents’ former hometown of Broadstairs, I discovered that before it became a Victorian seaside resort it was a small fishing village called Bradstowe and that there was a Shrine to ‘Our Lady of Bradstowe’. The fisherman would pray at the shrine before heading out into the deep. Our Lady, ubiquitous, ever present in people’s lives, accessible, bringing Christ, making Christ accessible.

Luke’s gospel is largely of course where we learn about the life of Mary. In our Gospel today we find Luke setting an historical context . . . in the time of Emperor Augustus, when Quirinius was governor of Syria, we learn that she lived in Nazareth, (and we remember the words of Nathanael in John’s Gospel: ‘Nazareth, can anything good come out of Nazareth’), we are reminded of the imposition of the invading Roman rulers and the subsequent journey to Bethlehem. On one level this is all very ordinary, it is very humble, it speaks of the trials of ordinary lives and out of this the Christ is born.

As I watched the video of Olivia singing ‘Let’s get Physical’ this week with its wonderful tongue in cheek ending, I wondered if our call, following Mary is ‘Let’s get incarnational.’ The life of Mary should be our life, prayerful attentiveness to the call of God and the willingness to step out despite the most unpromising circumstances, that God might be accessible for all people. Listen again to the Magnificat. Over and above all the controversy surrounding this young woman, over and above the sometimes-unhelpful dogma and iconography, surely this is what her life and now ours is about. It all seems so very ordinary, humble and yet so profound—making God accessible to all, and today particularly as we mark the end of her earthy life, making us accessible to God. Amen.