

Mary: fact, fiction and faith.

The Church of Holy Wisdom was the crown jewel of Constantinople, the largest and grandest worship space in Christendom, and that evening it was packed with the faithful: men and women, young and old, soldiers and civilians—and most amazing of all, both eastern Orthodox *and* western Catholic Christians worshipping together for the first time in four hundred years. For centuries the armies of Islam had battered the Christian empire of Byzantium, inflicting defeat after defeat. Now the armies of the Sultan had the capital completely surrounded. What remained of the united Christian army of Byzantine troops and volunteers from Western Europe gathered to partake of our Lord's precious Body and Blood one last time. It was the 28th of May 1453, and the Turks were at the city's walls preparing a final assault. Everyone knew the fate of Constantinople would be sealed in the next few hours. They were making their peace with God.

After confessing their sins and sharing in the Blessed Sacrament, the city's defenders processed out to take their place on the walls. But near the main gate, the army stopped to pray one last time in front of Constantinople's holiest icon—the *Hodigetria*, “the Indicator of the Way.” For most of the last thousand years this image of Madonna and Child, believed to have been painted by St. Luke the Evangelist himself, had watched over those who came and went from the imperial city. The *Akathistos*, an ancient hymn praising the Blessed Virgin Mary, rang out from the troops gathered before the sacred image, their voices filling the streets: “Hail, you through whom Joy will shine forth! ... Hail, you who carries Him who carries all! ... Hail, you through whom the Creator becomes a Baby!” By dawn, most of the warriors who sang this hymn would perish. Their city would be in ruins.

For me the devotions of that final night in Constantinople exemplify the high esteem in which the medieval Church held the Blessed Virgin Mary. These men knew with virtual certainty that they would not see another sundown. They were engaged in a life-or-death struggle to preserve their culture and—as they saw it, the Christian faith—from annihilation. No doubt many thoughts went through their minds as they prepared to defend the walls. But almost to a man they chose to spend their last

hours on earth worshipping the Living God and honouring to the mother of Christ. Why? What was it about the Virgin Mary that inspired such devotion?

Today we are celebrating the Feast of Mary. Generally, Protestants call her Mary, the mother of Jesus, while Roman Catholics refer to her as the Blessed Virgin, and Greek Orthodox Christians call Mary the God bearer. In Episcopal circles, all these titles are used along with others: Mary of Nazareth; Mary, the Mother of God; the Virgin Mary and Mary, Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ are but a few examples. Mary's many titles both reflect her significance to Christians and our various perceptions about the impact her life and ministry have on our faith. As a means of celebrating this feast, let us meditate on the facts, fiction and faith surrounding Mary.

By facts I refer to what is actually recorded in Scripture. There are, of course lots of facts about Mary that are not contained in Scripture. For instance, we do not know who her mother and father were or what her life was like before she met the Angel Gabriel. The last textual reference to her comes from the story of Pentecost. The missing pieces are too numerous to recount. There may be an undiscovered text out there, but until God leads someone to it the only witness we have about Mary is in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles. Mary, according to these witnesses: was a native of Nazareth; a faithful and observant Jew; engaged and married to Joseph; she gave birth to a son with God's aid and without Joseph's biological contribution; was a cousin to Elizabeth who, with God's help, gave birth to a son after many barren years; was present for and participated in most of Jesus' ministry; witnessed Jesus' death; and received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The Gospel text for today is Mary's verbal praise and prophecy. Aside from Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, this is the only surviving text in Luke's Gospel where a woman declares God's mercy and announces God's justice in Jesus Christ. What high praise Mary offers, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour;" Participation in Sunday school or Evening and Morning Prayer services using the Book of Common Prayer helped many of

us commit this glorious text to memory. The God who stirred life in Mary's womb is "...holy ...showing mercy on those who fear God in every generation." The mercy, Mary proclaims, is also God's justice. God "...has cast down the might from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly." The Mary of Scripture is a courageous prophet in both word and in deed. Mary counts her blessings, "...Almighty has done great things for me..." God saved Mary from death by stoning, the punishment prescribed by Jewish law for women who pursue sex outside. God invited and empowered Mary's discipleship. Courageous and blessed is Mary.

We are meditating today on the Mary of fact, fiction and faith. The Mary of fiction is not radically different from the Mary of Scripture. Fiction here refers to things we claim about Mary that are not recorded in the Bible. The legends or traditions, that is tradition with a small t not Traditions with a capital T that are our official Church teachings, add pieces to what we have heard about Mary. Mary is not only supposed to have been a virgin when Jesus was born, but Mary is thought to have remained a virgin through her marriage to Joseph until her death. Mary's perpetual virginity has been claimed in spite of Scripture's testimony to the existence of her other children. It is also claimed in disregard for the Judaic affirmation of marital sex which Mary and Joseph, as observant and faithful Jews, must be honoured. For our Jewish mothers and fathers virginity was a quality admired and required of unmarried females. Married Jews engage in loving sexual activity not simply for procreation, but to facilitate their relationship with God. Another interesting claim is that Mary did not die, but ascended bodily into heaven. Of course this is not in the Bible, but is taught by some Christians. Did Mary's role in our salvation seem so important that we assumed God would treat her differently than Jesus and the disciples? Certainly, Mary is worthy of honour, but did her merit exempt her from experiencing death?

Finally, Mary is held up as a model mother and wife. Scripture demonstrates that Mary is a model Christian and an exemplary disciple. Further

extrapolations might lead one to admire some of Mary and Joseph's parenting skills. Mary let an angel convince her to conceive a child out of wedlock. Joseph kept his commitment to marry Mary. Mary with Joseph fed, housed, educated and protected Jesus. Like all good parents and guardians they released Jesus so that he could live his own life and follow his own calling. They tried to support, advise and observe without interfering. Sadly, Mary like far too many people witnessed the untimely death of a loved one. Lifting Mary up as a model for all mothers and wives can do unintended harm. Ought a mother silently permit the murder of her child? Of course not. Can all women find life partners who will love them and their child born to another? Sadly, not. We can and should claim God's presence guiding and guarding Mary and affirm God's similar interventions in the lives of women and men yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Facts and fiction point to a woman who well deserves to be remembered and honoured on this day. Our faith in what God did through Mary has at times, inspired us to make her "larger, than life." God does not object to the ways in which we venerate saints as long as we do not denigrate God's children (potential saints) in the process. After all, in the prayer that Jesus taught us we ask God to "...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us..." God upholds us and we are to do the same for others.

In our meditation on Mary we find so many gifts to nurture our faith. Scripture records show that Mary was an ordinary person like you and me. God challenged and empowered her and she counted each as blessings from God. Mary, already faithful and observant, is called to do more for God. Her yes to the angel grants us a legacy of courage, the example of a prophet in word and deed. Claims from outside Scripture even lend some aid to our faith. Mary's legendary trails and triumphs remind us that everyone who loves God receives God's mercy. Mercy that lifting us up when we are low and brings us down to size when we "get to big for our breeches."

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.