

Mary the God-Bearer — The Theotokos

Sermon · Not stated (a Christmas sermon)

Traditionally, most pastors preach the Nativity story at this time of the year. Not easy to do that year after year. I will make a departure from this tradition and instead focus on Mother Mary, or Virgin Mary, as she is generally known. We will look at her from the perspective of being the God-Bearer.

The excitement of the Christmas season is building up, in the churches and at homes, with only a few more days left as we approach Christmas. God's preparations for the Incarnation took longer than a day, a week, or a month. It required thousands of people and many thousands of years to complete. It was not an accident that the Incarnation happened at a certain moment in history. It was a meticulously planned event that was designed to change the history of the world. The coming of Christ was well rehearsed, projected centuries earlier, and all by an Omniscient God. Yes, the Incarnation took enormous planning: a righteous virgin, a carpenter from an obscure town, a pagan emperor taking a census, a journey by foot, and a manger.

Simeon, who lived to witness Salvation, was spot on when he took the baby Jesus in his hands and spoke to Mary, saying, amongst other things, "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also" (Luke 2:35b, King James Version). It might have been the first note of sorrow for Mary, to be told how people will hate Jesus so much so that He will be crucified and, as a consequence, she too will suffer endlessly. We have no evidence that Mary knew about the joy of Christ's Resurrection at that time.

Perhaps you would like to be theological and talk about Mary as the one who is the locus for the coming together of Heaven and earth. Mary becomes almost a symbol, more than a person, when she is identified as the Mother of God. The term Theotokos, or Mother of God, formally affirmed for the Virgin Mary at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, is used across the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Catholic traditions. But that would then make Jesus just divine. The other school of thought is that Mary was an ordinary human, and Jesus assumed His humanity from her. We will go by our understanding that God incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ and was truly divine and truly human at the same time.

Have you ever experienced a Divine interruption in your life? All of us do, at one time or another in a lifespan, which changes our lives forever. If we pause the traditional narrative about Christmas for a moment and sit with the context of Mary's story, we discover that no one in all of human history has had the sort of Divine interruption that Mary faced and experienced. If we faithfully walk through the pages of Scripture, we find story after story of God's work in the lives of people, including that of the pillars of Biblical faith like Abraham and Moses, work that interrupts and startles almost every time. But none held the Son of the living God in the way Mary did. Mary bore the Divine interruption in her life with grace and great responsibility.

For some Christian traditions, Mary is an afterthought: a means to an end. She is rarely discussed. The dominant understanding of Mary is as a young woman who played the noble role of giving birth to Jesus. She is most often represented as composed, quiet, and responsive. She does her duty ordained by God and then fades into the background. I see Mary from a different perspective: not as a divine person to be worshipped, but as someone who needs to be revered and admired, someone who withstood stigma, insults, pain, and grief right from her teenage years for the glory of God.

When the angel Gabriel told Mary, tradition suggests she was barely thirteen or fourteen years old at the time, that she would soon bear a child, her immediate reaction was one of surrender to God's Will, whatever the future held because of this great announcement; she surrendered not only her physical body to carry the baby, but also all her plans, her dreams, her expectations, and her hopes. As an unwed pregnant girl, Mary knew she would suffer untold stigma in the society she lived in. Friends, surrendering to the Will of God involves great personal sacrifices. What is it God is asking you today to give up for His glory? Is there a part of your life, a place in your heart, that you are struggling to surrender?

When most others travelled on donkeys and horseback with equally fortunate friends and relatives, the Mother of God travelled, perhaps, on foot, in her advanced stage of pregnancy. Scripture does not say anything otherwise. Lowly and insignificant as they were, Mary and Joseph must have struggled through the hilly terrain to reach Bethlehem, about seventy miles away, a six-to-seven-day journey. The joyful thought that she was about to bring to this planet a Son who is God, secretly harboured in her heart, must have made the hardships feel inconsequential to Mary.

As they eventually found a stable, a carved-out opening on the side of a hill, sharing space with animals, Mary, inexperienced and alone, did not complain. All around them, in the inns and the houses of the rich and mighty, people were making merry, eating and drinking and addressing the guests of honour as “lords.” Little were they aware of the great blessing God was bestowing on humanity in the stable close by.

The birth of God the Son was an ordinary event which went unnoticed by all those who thronged Bethlehem. It is amazing how this seemingly natural event, happening in the life of a humble young woman on this earth, had led the angels in Heaven into such euphoria that their songs, glorifying God, could be heard on earth. This young woman, Mary, however, knew the great marvel she was carrying and was about to bring forth into this world, naturally and in perfect human form. She conceived without sin, and on that fateful night, she gave birth naturally.

The birth itself might have been pitiful. Mary went through it naturally, as all women would, but without the advice, help, counselling, and consolation of elder women. She might have been ill-equipped in matters and substances “a soon-to-be mother” should know or would need. Scripture tells us that, when God the Son was born, Mary and Joseph wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, perhaps made out of Mary’s own clothes, handy at that time. What a humble way to bring into this world the one and only mighty God! What a humble way for God to enter this world! Mary personified Obedience, Devotion, and an unwavering Faith in God.

We do not have many details of how Mary brought up Jesus. Think about this: what would you do if you were entrusted with the most precious stone on earth? You would safeguard it like your own life. And Mary had in her arms something much more precious, both on earth and in Heaven. The Bible tells us how Mary and Joseph had to search frantically for Jesus when He was twelve years old, and eventually found Him in the Temple. Luke tells us that after this event, Jesus “went down to Nazareth with them, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:51-52, King James Version). That speaks of how well Mary nurtured Jesus all through.

As we look at the Scripture, it is amazing that Mary was the only human being with Jesus throughout His earthly life. She was the only person to love Jesus before He was even born. Mary loved Jesus in the Temple at the age of twelve, when Jesus amazed all of them with His profound wisdom. Mary loved Jesus when they were together at the wedding in Cana, the site of His first miracle; Mary was pressing Jesus to perform the miracle when He was not even ready yet. Mary loved Jesus when He told the crowds that she and her other sons were not His true family; those who did the will of God were His true family. Mary understood, because she knew Who He was.

Mary loved Jesus as she witnessed the inhuman torture Jesus was subjected to. She loved Him at the foot of the Cross when she watched Him executed. Have you ever wondered why Mary chose to be at these places? She wanted to suffer along with her Son. Parents can feel the pain their children go through, mental and physical. At this stage, I want to argue that God the Father suffered with God the Son. It could not have been any other way, as both are of the same substance, the mysterious Trinitarian configuration. Mary was not part of that, but she was the mother. We learn from the Gospel accounts that Jesus spoke seven times, nailed to the tree. His third saying from the Cross was to entrust His mother, who had stood by Him all the time and was now at the foot of the Cross, grief-stricken, to a trusted disciple who was young and dear to Jesus.

And finally, we see Mary in the Book of Acts, when Jesus had been raised from the dead and now appeared as the Risen Christ. Mary inspired and led others in the formation of the Church after the death of Jesus. Some scholars have suggested that Mary herself, whether directly or through family tradition, stood behind many of the accounts of Jesus’s early life recorded in the Gospels, particularly Luke’s (see, for example, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2006); this remains a scholarly hypothesis rather than a settled historical fact. Tradition holds that she passed into glory eleven years after the death of Jesus, sometime around AD 41, a date recorded by the seventh- or eighth-century chronicler Hippolytus of Thebes; Scripture itself does not record the end of Mary’s life, so this remains church tradition rather than verified history.

In conclusion, I want to go back to the first Christmas. In this first scene itself, Jesus puts to shame the entire world for its neglect of the needy, for its selfishness, and its indifference to the sufferings of others. I would say that He began His teaching right on that cold, wintry night, as He cried for the first time after birth. Let me quote for you what Martin Luther wrote about it: “It shows that the world’s greatest wisdom is foolishness, her best actions are wrong, and her greatest treasures are misfortunes. What had Bethlehem when it did not have Christ? What have they now who at that time had enough? What do Joseph and Mary lack now, although at that time they had no room to sleep comfortably?” (Martin Luther, “The Story of Jesus’ Birth,” Christmas sermon on Luke 2:1-14, as compiled in Roland H. Bainton, ed., *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, 1948). I would hasten to add: what have we today, with all the comforts and conveniences in life, when we do not allow Jesus to take birth in our hearts? Christmas should happen in our hearts, not just on the day we celebrate it, but time and again, whenever we stray from His teachings, whenever we fail to feed the hungry, offer a drink to the thirsty, shelter a stranger, clothe the naked, or visit the distressed.

Let me close this with my fondest wishes to all of you, and with the prayer that you may celebrate this Christmas with prayer and supplication, meditating on the true spirit of its purpose, and allowing Jesus to be born in our hearts.