

John Docherty, May 10, 2015

“Mary, mother of Jesus”

Mother’s day ... it’s not a religious holiday, or a holiday with any particularly long history. There *is* a holiday called “Mothering Day” that developed in the sixteenth century as a ritual of returning to one’s “mother church”, or home church, during Lent, but that is not the celebration we now know as “Mother’s Day”.

No ... “Mother’s Day” is a thoroughly secular holiday meant to honour one’s biological mother, rather than one’s ecclesiastical mother. It seems to have started about a hundred years ago in the United States, and spread to the UK during the two world wars.

But, that’s okay. We’ve quite happily embraced a celebration of motherhood in the church, and are not overly perturbed by the fact that we’ve taken our lead on this issue from the culture of the day.

Issues on which no one would dare to disagree are often referred to as “motherhood” issues. Motherhood. Who could be against *that*?

Every single one of us has, or has had, a mother.

Without exception.

We are all of us born of woman.

I understand that some feminists don’t like the term “woman”, because of the paternalistic tones and the implied inferiority related to the meaning of the term as “one who is derived from the man”; a reference to the Genesis story of Eve being taken from Adam’s rib.

I can sympathise a little bit with that discomfort, but I actually like the term “woman”, because in my much younger days when I first learned of the physical differences between men and women, I thought the term was an abbreviation of “womb-man” – a man with a womb.

I thought that was pretty neat. Women weren’t less than men, they were men with something extra, something amazing – a womb; a place where new human life could be created.

Mind you, I recognise that many cultures, including our own, have a long history of relegating women to roles of lesser importance, or of seeing women as little more than walking wombs. And I recognise that some of our assumptions about the roles of women and men are subtly conveyed by the way we use language.

For example, to ‘mother’ a child is to care for, and generally protect, raise, and nurture a child. It’s a turn of phrase filled with significance, including a clear expectation that the one “mothering” will have an intimate, and important, place in fashioning this child as it grows.

To ‘father’ a child, on the other hand, is to be present at the child’s conception. Nothing more. There may be legal and moral expectations following upon the fact of being a child’s father, but the linguistic turn of phrase is limited in the extreme.

The flip side of seeing women as “lesser beings” is to elevate them to almost mythic levels : princesses, all; dainty flowers; vessels of purity, chastity and virtue. That describes all the women here ... right?

I know I’m treading on dangerous ground here. With every step I risk placing my foot firmly on a hidden mine, blowing my foot off, and offending everybody in the congregation in the process.

So I’m going to shift gears slightly.

Since it’s Mother’s Day, I thought I would use this meditation to look at a Mother from the Bible, to explore what we could take away or learn about her. I had two obvious and exceptional women to consider.

The first choice, of course, would be Eve, the Mother of all mothers.

But Eve, unfortunately, is the source of all our troubles. At least, the account we have of Eve in the early chapters of Genesis paints her as the source of all our troubles. She is the one who first eats of the forbidden fruit; she is the one who draws Adam into her disobedience.

Mind you, Adam is no pillar of righteousness and chivalry. He goes along with Eve, then in truly cowardly fashion, blames her for his own decision to eat the fruit that he knows had been forbidden to him.

What do you do with a pair like that? Well, one god might sigh, shake his head, then decide to wipe the slate clean and start over with improved models.

Another God might sigh, shake his head, then point out to the pair that there are consequences to these kinds of decisions. This God might kick them out of the garden and tell them, in no uncertain terms, that they now had to work for the life they had been given.

Eve, in this scenario, might be told that she, in particular, was going to suffer for what she'd done. And, in this scenario, those who followed might be inclined to extend to all women the blame that was placed on Eve for this original act of disobedience, this original sin.

And the ripple effects of this attitude might then continue down to the present day.

Well, that's kind of discouraging. I didn't think I wanted to tackle all the ways that women are portrayed in a poor light, from the writer of Genesis, through the stories of Samson and Delilah, and Jezebel, to the apostle Paul's attitude towards women.

So I decided that maybe my other potential choice might be a better one.

From Eve, the Mother of all mothers, I could move on to Mary, the Mother of God.

How's that for a title? Mother of God.

Mennonites, and Protestants in general, don't refer to Mary in that way. We prefer to either ignore her altogether, except perhaps at Christmas when she is an unavoidable part of the story, or we insist that she is Mary, mother of Jesus – *not* Mother of God.

But, as far as the broader Christian world goes, we are in the minority when it comes to Mary.

I suppose it's because "Mother of God" has a bit of a pagan ring to it. It smacks of goddesses, and pantheons, and forest spirits.

And yet, if truth be told, it seems to me that our attitude towards Mary is perhaps one of the most obvious ways that Protestant Christianity differs from Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. How we understand the workings of

salvation differs from one confession to the other, but we are otherwise remarkably similar in how we understand our faith.

Our understanding of God is virtually identical across the board. Our understanding of Jesus' divinity and saving work on the cross is virtually identical across the board. Our belief in the resurrection is identical across the board.

But when it comes to Mary, we part company. We Protestants give almost no place to Mary in the great scheme of things, while Catholics and Orthodox give her an extremely important place.

Virtually half of all Christians in the world are Roman Catholics, for whom Mary is so important that she is thought to have been conceived without the taint of original sin (the Immaculate Conception dogmatized by Pope Pius IX – good old Pie IX); she is believed to have been a virgin until the end of her earthly life; she is believed to have been raised bodily to heaven at the end of her earthly life.

About an eighth of Christians in the world are Orthodox. One Orthodox theologian writes, "Love and veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary is the soul of Orthodox piety. A faith in Christ which does not include his mother is another faith, another Christianity from that of the Orthodox church."

It's a curious thing, to my mind, because we have, in fact, very little to go on when it comes to this woman who gave birth to Jesus. On the other hand, what we *do* know of her from the Biblical sources is really interesting.

The earliest snapshot we have of her isn't from Matthew, but from Luke. In chapter one, Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel who tells her that she will conceive a child of the Holy Spirit, even though she's a virgin. We don't really know how old she is at this point, though it's likely she's in her teens. In fact, apart from Moses and King David, I think she's the only other person in scripture for whom we have a bit of a cross-section of her life, from her early years until she is perhaps in her early fifties.

At any rate, when Gabriel greets her, it's with these words (more or less) : "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee."

Those of us who were raised in the Catholic Church will be very familiar with that phrase, and we will have linked it up with the greeting received by Mary when she

went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist : “... blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus...”.

When my Granny died, some twelve years ago, Mary-Lou and I went to Scotland to attend her funeral. Her body was being kept in my aunt’s flat, where my Granny had been living for the last three years of her life. Before taking the body to the church for the funeral, the immediate family gathered around the coffin to pray the rosary together.

For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the rosary, it’s this chain of prayer beads you sometimes see Catholics using. It consists of a series of beads used to keep track of the number of times a particular prayer is repeated. In the case of the rosary, the majority of the prayers are “Hail Marys”, though it begins with reciting the Apostle’s Creed; is then interspersed with a few “Lord’s Prayers”, and a few “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”. The first half of the “Hail Mary” is simply : “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” Very Biblical.

I prayed along with the other members of the family for this part of the Hail Mary. I’m quite happy to participate in an expression of respect for the woman who gave birth to Jesus. I have no real problem echoing the words of an angel and the mother of John the Baptist.

I couldn’t pray, though, the second part of the prayer, which is : “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death, Amen.”

And that, I think, is the crux of the real difference between us Protestants and the Catholic and Orthodox parts of the family. We don’t pray for saints to intercede for us ... not even the Mother of Jesus.

We’re not particularly shy about asking for prayers from each other. We’re just a little uncomfortable asking for prayers from those who aren’t around anymore. Although, to be fair, in Catholic theology Mary *is* still around, having been raised bodily to heaven at her “Assumption”.

But, that said, I think we non-Catholics do a disservice to the memory of Mary to simply set her aside as a necessary, but otherwise unimportant player in the full mystery that is Jesus’ life.

And even if the gospels give us a little bit more of a picture of Mary Magdalene than they do of Mary, mother of Jesus, she must have been an amazing woman. She's certainly an intriguing figure.

What must it have been like for this very young woman to carry the child who was to become the Messiah; to hear the words of the shepherds who came to Bethlehem at Jesus' birth and to "... keep all these things, pondering them in her heart ..."; to witness all the things her son did as he travelled about the countryside preaching and healing; only to then have to stand and watch as he was taunted, whipped, and crucified?

On this Mother's Day, as you think of the ways that your own mother influenced *your* life, take a few moments to reflect a bit on how Mary influenced *Jesus'* life, and consider the price *she* paid for the promise of eternal life that *we* enjoy.