

March 2017 (a sermon preached on 27th February for the Cell of Mary, Our Lady of Faith)

Early Christians rather took Mary for granted, just as they largely took Jesus for granted. Apart from a few fantasists who thought Jesus hadn't been a real human being at all - the kind of people the letter to the Hebrews was getting at, they knew their salvation depended on what God had done in Jesus - they worshipped him, they followed him, they loved him, they lived and died for him, and that was enough. Mary was his mother; blessed indeed the womb that bore him and the breasts that suckled him - and above all blessed she who heard the word of God and did it. All this was taken for granted Jesus was God and Mary was the mother of God QED.

As time went on, however, questions arose that forced them to begin to get their ideas into some sort of order.

What prompted the question wasn't directly about Mary at all. It was about Jesus.

Was the child Mary carried in her womb, brought to birth in Bethlehem, raised at Nazareth and so on, truly God or not?

This isn't an airy fairy theoretical question, but is about our salvation and how we should behave. Without going into too much detail, we need, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, a saviour who is like us in every way except for sin. That's so he can be a teacher and example and a sacrifice for us. But if that's all he is, how can that actually help us? After all, most of us know what we ought to do, and often want to do it, but find something in the way. So if Jesus really is our saviour as well as being completely one with us in our weakness and struggles, he also needs to be completely one with God in his mercy, power and grace.

How Jesus could have been both human and divine was the big question that dominated Christians - ordinary worshippers and their pastors first, and then their theologians and teachers as they tried to find ways of thinking and speaking about this that did some sort of justice to this conviction that was at once so important and so difficult.

This was the background to an argument that divided Christians in the fifth century.

Like so often in human disagreements whether in theology or anything else, what provoked the argument was apparently something very small. As I have said, early Christians worshipped Jesus as God without really thinking about it, it followed that they referred to Mary as Mother of God.

But in the early fifth century a bishop declared in a sermon that Mary had only been the mother of the human Jesus. So "mother of Jesus," "mother of the Lord" even, would be OK, but "mother of

God” went too far. There’s nothing wrong with these other expressions, both perfectly true. The problem was that by challenging the traditional language, the bishop in question was not only upsetting popular piety, but dividing the one person Jesus Christ into two - a human being born of Mary and a divine Saviour who merely made use of her. Ordinary Christians didn’t know quite how to put it into words, but they knew that as St John put it so strikingly, the Word became flesh - yes real flesh, like us in all things except sin.

Eventually a universal church council at Ephesus in 451 decided that resolved to stick with the traditional description of Mary as “Mother of God” , because to deny it suggested that the Babe of Bethlehem, the teacher in Galilee and the crucified victim in Jerusalem was merely a heroic human being and not God taking onto himself all the horrors of this world in order to heal them.

What we believe and say about Mary therefore helps us keep our vision of Jesus clear.

This is particularly important in the modern world. Lots of people say they admire or even love Jesus but have only the vaguest of notions what they mean by this. The Church’s proclamation of Mary as “Mother of God” leaves us in no doubt. The Jesus we love, worship and follow is God himself sharing our human life, releasing us from its limitations and opening heaven to us all.