

A MEDITATION ON MARY

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*Beautiful she is, Sir! Lovely! Sometimes like a great tree in
flower,*

Sometimes like a white daffowndilly,

Small and slender like. Hard as diamonds,

Soft as moonlight. Warm as Sunlight,

Cold as frost in the stars. Proud and far off.

As a snow mountain, and as merry as any girl

I ever saw with daisies in her hair in springtime.

The words were spoken by the hobbit Samwise Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings*. He was describing his own sweetheart whom he's left behind to join Frodo on his quest to destroy the Ring.

I think they are also a beautiful description of Mary, the servant mother - Mary of the Magnificat - hers was a song of praise to God, a response to the extraordinary events that overtook what was once an ordinary life.

When we meet her in Luke's Gospel, Mary is a teenager in Palestine, neither remarkably pious nor well-connected, a woman, a member of an oppressed people, living in a rural backwater of the mighty Roman Empire. Then, apparently without warning, this young woman encounters an Angel called Gabriel who announces that she has been chosen to be the mother of the Saviour of the world. Mary is troubled, no

wonder. In response to her question: “How can this be?” the angel doesn’t offer an explanation. He says only that a sign, the unlikely pregnancy of Mary’s aged cousin Elizabeth, will confirm his announcement is true. I wonder was she confident, courageous, fearful, frantic, when she left home. Or, as Mother Teresa once said, she got up quickly and joyfully to visit and to minister to her cousin. We don’t know Mary’s mind, which - at this stage of the story, at least - is closed to us. We do know that Mary confirms the Angel’s words when she meets her cousin; we know she receives Elizabeth’s blessing. Only then does she give us her own insight, her own song.

It is a song of someone consciously caught up in a larger story, the story of God’s faithfulness to His people. Both her story and her song become our own each time we sing the Magnificat. We are filled with the same wonder and joy Mary felt. But for many of us, Mary can be a remote figure - she’s almost lost, sometimes because 2000 years of history gets in the way. Is she too transcendent, too near the divine, to be approachable?

Rather I think she is a real woman caught up in an unreal miracle; she is a woman who trusts, obeys, doubts, worries, ponders and perseveres in the midst of the strangest circumstances. If you have ever come across the statue of Mary outside Salisbury Cathedral you will be confronted with an older woman tall and slender, striding out, her back towards the Cathedral, she has a message to proclaim. This not a sweet young woman of spun sugar that we see so often.

Luke's Mary doesn't stand in the shadow of her husband Joseph; he stands in hers.

When Jesus is born, the elderly Prophet Simeon recognises the child as the Messiah and ignoring convention speaks directly to Mary rather than her husband. He fixes his gaze on her and for tells the destinies of both mother and Son: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Twelve years later, when the distraught parents find Jesus in the Temple, it is Mary who chastises the child. Even though He was her son, her flesh and blood, Jesus makes it all too clear that He did not belong to her and that His mission could not and would never be constrained by the natural bonds of motherly affection. She both was and was not His mother, but her humanity was the only humanity He knew, and yet Her dreams were not His. Her doubts were not His. Simeon's sword was already drawn. Yet Mary freely affirms God's call: "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be unto me according to your word".

Mary understands some things, but much about herself and her son's destiny are shrouded in mystery. So it is for all of us who follow Jesus, the road ahead and behind will be uncertain, hidden perhaps, even utterly irrational. Can we point to times when we were certain, certain about our relationship with God,

but somehow things have changed? Perhaps you find yourself there today.

But now we find Mary standing and watching at the foot of the cross.

Jesus' hour has come.

Jesus first mentioned His hour at His first miracle the turning of water into wine. Mary was there, she came to tell Him the wine was running low. That story concludes that the disciples saw this display of Jesus' glory and believed in Him. Not anymore, it seems. They have all forsaken Him and run away - all, that is, except four women and one man.

The hour, Jesus' hour, is the hour of His death. Did Mary know it would end in this way? This was the hour to which the symbolic wedding wine pointed all along. Mary was there at the beginning of His ministry, she is here at the end. Why? What role does she play?

Despite the words of rejection, Jesus abandoned by disciples and friends remains in communion with His mother. In some mysterious way, in His birth and death, He needs her presence, her love, her trust and love are His strength, joy and consolation. A woman of compassion, she remains standing at the cross when then others have fled in doubt and fear. With and in Jesus she offers all to God. She stands still and silent; immobilised by

the terrible scene unfolding before her. Is this the final piercing of the sword Simeon had spoken many years before. We speak of Jesus' passion, but it is Mary's passion too, for no one can suffer more than a mother who has to witness the death of her own child.

She knows Jesus will not be rescued. Jesus sees and then He speaks. He sees His mother and the disciple whom He loved. "Woman," the simple designation, again reminds us of the wedding at Cana. Having caught her attention, Jesus adds: "Behold your son". And she I expect turns her gaze one last time to her son - to look at Him one last time. Jesus speaks again, this time to His beloved disciple: "Behold your mother". Jesus entrusts them to each other.

All is finished. Jesus is dead. Joseph of Arimathea begged for Jesus' body. Somebody had to climb the ladder to prise Him down for us and for Mary. She must have held His body and gathered up those limbs that brought swift peace on the mountains.

I think just once, with all of us who have knelt ice cold before our beloved dead, she says: "Oh dear God, dear God, no!"

In another land and in a different time there is another mother who embraces her dead son, helpless and turned to stone, in silent pain. It is a statue of a mother and her dead son by Kathe Kollwitz. She began working on her pieta in memory of her son

who was killed on the battlefield in WW1. The mother is seated and has her dead son lying between her knees in her lap. There is pain and reflection. Reflecting on the fact that her son was not accepted by His people, she later wrote: “I sometimes think, it was then began the long walk to the grave. That was the break, the stoop to such a level that I could never again stand upright”.

The statue is placed in the middle of the chamber of what was once a guard room in Berlin. It is a memorial for the victims of war and tyranny. Beneath it are laid the remains of an unknown soldier and an unknown concentration camp prisoner. Directly overhead, the oculus allows sunlight, rain and snow to fall onto the agonised mother. “Blessed are those who mourn”. This place draws us into the heart of this beatitude, evoking the suffering of mothers all over the world, from Syria to the Congo. Tourists come in off the street and without exception fall silent. The woman is so wrapped up in her sorrow that she seems unapproachable, visitors stand at a distance and partake in her grief. But can they? When Jesus dies Mary was completely alone in that no one could enter into her loss because no one else was Jesus’ mother.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”.

Did Mary remember those precious words of her Son spoken on that hillside, as she held His lifeless body in her arms?

“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping,

Rachel weeping for her children refusing to be comforted because they are no more.” (Jeremiah 31.15)