

Spiritual Essay

SEEKING A REAL MARY OF
NAZARETH FOR TODAY

By JUDITH GRAY

THE REBELLION AGAINST an insipid, sexless Mary of Nazareth grows apace – even if the safe, feminine Mary, focus for a male priesthood, remains alive and well in the unconscious of countless men and women. Can we discover a ‘real’ Mary, no longer a tool in the hands of a patriarchal Church but an inspiration for today – no longer the ‘comforter of the disturbed’ but the ‘disturber of the comfortable’, as Tissa Balasuriya has put it?

Such a Mary would be one with all who have suffered down the ages, the memory of her would be dangerous, inspiring believers not only to thirst but to act for justice. Is there a transforming power for women in the story of a real Mary for today, a transforming power for the whole Church? How might we discover a ‘real Mary’ anyway?

Mary the woman

If we come to seek a ‘real’ Mary of Nazareth for our own times, the one sure fact we know about her is that she was a woman. Now this statement, simple and trite as it may seem, holds a mine of potentiality for the spirituality of women and for the whole Church.

Alice Walker’s disturbing novel about mutilating female initiation in an African tribe, *Possessing the secret of joy*, is dedicated ‘with tenderness and respect to the blameless vulva’.¹ It is women’s physicality which has so often been feared and despised in the Christian Church and it is claimed that the cult of Mary has been inextricably interwoven with Christian convictions about the dangers of the flesh and their special connection with women.² In addition to St Paul (e.g. 1 Tim, 2:11–14), we find a plethora of churchmen asserting that women are the ‘devil’s gateway’. Even the Reformers carried on the negative tradition. Luther, who should have known better since he was happily married, talked about men’s physiology reflecting their capacity for wisdom since ‘the place where the filth flows out is small’. Women on the other hand have ‘lots of filth and little wisdom’.³

We know the taboos in Judaism and Christianity which have surrounded menstruation and childbirth, together with the still current fears in some quarters regarding the ordination of women. Holiness becomes a male mystery. Women may be baptized but they cannot represent the spiritual process of rebirth and nourishment, or represent Christ in whom is ‘neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female’

(Gal 3:28), but one new humanity. Yet in Mary of Nazareth we see God inhabiting the body of a woman; entering the world as a baby through the birth-canal placed, as Graham Greene said in one of his books, between urine and faeces; God suckling at a woman's breast.

Mary can be celebrated first of all as a woman in her physical reality, that female physicality feared by a patriarchal Church. This seems to me to give all women something to celebrate, for the body of a woman with breasts and womb and genitals is shared with Mary. A woman's body becomes inseparably part of salvation history. Through Mary's assumption a woman's body is now with God. Three centuries before the Dogma of the Assumption was promulgated, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, Thomas Ken, joyously wrote:

Heaven with transcendent joys her entrance graced,
Next to his throne her Son his Mother placed;
And here below, now she's of heaven possesset,
All generations are to call her blest.⁴

We may sympathize with the sentiments expressed by Janet Martin Soskice, 'sometimes I wish I had never heard of "women", much less discovered I was one' – and a feminist into the bargain.⁵ Yet feminists are to be thanked for asserting their belief in the goodness of the body and affectivity (the denial of whose goodness has impoverished women and men alike). The body and emotions are not the locale only of sinful drives. 'Embodied spirituality', to which balanced feminist approaches may inspire us, is holistic, celebrating the goodness of our physical being and our human sexuality, perceived as far wider than genitality only. Spirit and matter are two manifestations of one reality. We catch glimpses of this in the Orthodox tradition, in icons whose glowing beauty reveal matter as diaphanous to the divine. To pray before an icon is to be, even unconsciously, touched by this truth. St Gregory of Palamas wrote that the human is neither soul nor body separate from each other, but 'both together, since together they have been created in the image of God'.⁶ Prayer is 'primary speech' in the sense that it is not simply words spoken or attitudes assumed, but voices of instinct, emotion, images from the unconscious, the language of our bodies.⁷

The Hebrew word for woman, *nekeiva*, connotes the bearer of a hollow, of interior space. Since we are psychosomatic realities, interior space is not only a biological reality but a way of being, of having space in which birth of many sorts can take place. The language of a woman's body speaks of the possibility of openness to the 'other', of the capacity for bearing, liberating and nourishing life, of time measured by cyclic rhythms of blood. Could this be a social metaphor for the Church in its vocation to be a habitation, a 'home', where the 'other' is received, where growth, giving birth and transformation take place, where life is liberated not stifled, a place both of community and interdependence.⁸ Can we envision the Church as a living, *changing* reality since 'no age suffices to present to our view the church of God in all its completeness'?⁹

Mary of Nazareth, with her closeness to nature, its rhythms and cycles in her own body through menstruation, pregnancy, birth and menopause, can teach both women and men about our rootedness in the natural order, calling us to wholeness and integration, to a spirituality which embraces every facet of our humanity and a deep reverence for the whole of creation. Mary may inspire us to a healing of the dualism that has riddled religion and society since classical times and the sexism that has accompanied it.

The exorcism of the demonic spirit of sexism in the church touches off a revolution that must transform all relations of alienation and domination, between self and body, between leaders and community, between person and person, between social groups, church and world, between humanity and nature, and finally our model of God in relation to creation – all of which have been modelled on the sexist schizophrenia.¹⁰

Mary the virgin, unconventional woman

At evensong of the Presentation of Christ and Purification of Mary, one of our antiphons on the psalms ran thus:

When you were born ineffably of a virgin, then were the scriptures fulfilled; you came down as rain into a fleece of wool, to bring salvation to humankind. We praise you, O our God.

Words and music combine to create a statement of beauty and of mystery, not least the allusions to the virgin birth. Yet only two of the gospels and none of the epistles speak directly of a 'virgin birth'. Is there for us another way of appropriating its symbolism, of allowing it to speak to us today? Ordinarily virginity is understood as something to be lost irrevocably through sexual activity. Just occasionally, as in Philo, virginity becomes a state of restoration. David Jackson, in his argument about Philo, tells us that, according to Philo, when men and women make love and the man's seed enters the woman who then has children, virginity is lost. But when God loves the human soul and impregnates it with the divine Word, virginity is restored and there is a wholly new beginning.¹¹ This is true of both women and men in God's dealing with them. May not Matthew and Luke be saying that, here, in Mary the virgin, is a new beginning for humankind?

Virginity in a spiritual and psychological sense can symbolize the opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning and the birth of compassion. It can also point to true self-actualization and connectedness to oneself and to God; a personal integrity and wholeness by which we cease to live a life derived from others, dependent on things outside ourselves for a sense of our own worth. Something of virginity's symbolism is necessary for our wholeness as human beings. Christopher Scott puts it this way:

The story of Jesus' virgin birth must not be taken in isolation, but in union with his teaching on being born again and on becoming like

little children. Whether or not one wishes to believe that it is history is of much less importance than the realisation that it is the model for our own growth into psychological wholeness.¹²

Such a model may express our ability, indeed vocation, to say 'yes' to what disrupts yet calls us. In one sense we are to be, as Mary is said to be, ever-virgin, being constantly open to God's new beginnings, impregnated with the divine Word and Wisdom.

This dynamic understanding of virginity is expressed by many Christian Asian women who see Mary's virginity as an active symbol of a resistance and the virgin birth a symbol of the end of the patriarchal order, a truly new beginning for all humanity.¹³ Looked at from a socio-sexual point of view, the literal embracing of the single virgin life (whether in the desert or throughout the Middle Ages) provided for women a freedom from the expectations of society and from male domination. Mary's virginity (whether biological or not) is therefore a symbol of a new freedom. The annunciation, far from portraying female submissiveness and subordination, displays a woman of integrity and independence exercising autonomy in the free, unmediated choice she makes in partnership with her God.

Matthew's genealogy includes women of dubious, scandalous or foreign background: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba. Beside them he places Mary 'of whom was born Jesus' (1:1-16). Placed among these unconventional women, Mary is apparently seen by Matthew as one of them. The four women mentioned shared the experience of irregular relationships or marriages, yet were used by God in the messianic plan. Perhaps we see here a veiled reference to Jesus' illegitimacy? In Mark's Gospel, contrary to Jewish custom by which children were known by relationship to their father, Jesus is called 'son of Mary'. Is Mary a scandal to convention as these four women were? In Matthew and Luke we see Mary putting trust in God, giving love and obedience to God even in the most devastating and incomprehensible experiences of life. She trusts God, believing that there is no evil out of which God cannot bring some good. Mary stands with the unconventional, a revolutionary young woman.

In the graced history of the people of God stand those women in the Church who are neither married nor in religious orders. The vocation of the single lay woman needs to be affirmed and valued, perhaps reflecting another aspect of 'virginity'. Are not all the baptized – single, married and religious – called to a consecrated life? John Paul II, in his recent *Letter to women*,¹⁴ singles out consecrated women, i.e. religious, as 'following the greatest of women, the mother of Jesus Christ'. But what about those ordinary single women who do not enjoy the status and power of women religious in the Roman Catholic Church? For those of us in religious communities in the Anglican Church the comparison is somewhat different. Archbishop Carey calls us our church's 'best kept secret'. Hardly anyone seems to know we exist, and if they do it is possibly to judge us an aberration, though a useful one at times, compared to

the 'normality' of those who are married and mothers 'following the greatest of women, the mother of Jesus Christ'.

Mary can also speak to another group of women today, those women who, abused and violated, or promiscuous in the past, feel sullied and despairing. Women who have had abortions or had to surrender a child born out of wedlock carry an unassuaged grief and guilt. Mary's virginity speaks of a new beginning. Her woman's knowledge and tenderness is there for them. One such young woman, devastated by sexual abuse from the time she was five, writes:

My love for Our Lady is really important, especially now when I am having to face the suffering of the past so as to be free of it. God's 'out there' and doesn't seem to be around. Whenever I'm struggling with the darkness, God seems to leave me to it. Holding on to Our Lady is all I've got. I need to talk to Mother Mary. It's easy because in her I see the acceptance, the strength and love she has to give me. I can talk to her and I know she listens and prays for me.

Mary, woman of faith

On the coast of north-west France, where the cliffs stand high above the foaming surf crashing against the rocks below, there is a marian shrine dedicated to 'Our Lady of the Risk'. Risk-taking is at the heart of our Christian faith and discipleship, risk was at the heart of the incarnation and is at the heart of God's loving us here and now. The humble God kneels at our feet, takes the risk of asking to serve us, to heal and love us into life. A strong and humble young woman takes the risk of saying her unconditional 'Yes' to God's invitation to give herself without being able to hedge her bets and make sure of the future consequences. But her Fiat, 'Let it be to me', was not said once and for all. It was active throughout her whole life.

The annunciation story encapsulates an attitude of faith which grew out of the past and was sustained throughout Mary's life. Like all of us she experienced the gnawing of doubt, the insecurities of life, its crushing sorrows, not least that of seeing her son rejected and dead. But after the ascension, she is, as Acts tells us, with the disciples awaiting a further outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 1:14), an older woman now, but at one with the disciples of her son. She who had conceived Christ in her womb by the grace of the Holy Spirit, had first conceived Christ in her heart by that same grace. And Augustine says that the better of the two conceptions is the conceiving of Christ in faith.¹⁵ Where that response and that conception will lead us individually and corporately we will not know. All we know is that we will be stretched beyond what we thought were our limits. 'We must bear the pain of expansion, for we are stretched, indeed not ultimately on the rack of human torture, but on the glorious being of the Holy Ghost.'¹⁶

We are called to be constantly alert to the daily annunciations which come to each of us, hidden within the content of the ordinary, of the present

moment. God is to be found in the pain and joy of living fully all that is going on. That is where God speaks to us. 'Life entered in and was poured out.' This is the mystery of incarnation. God's life poured into the mess and beauty of our humanity and human life, choosing 'the nitty gritty materialism of dailiness – "unfortunate" pregnancies, overbooked hotels, politics and all that stuff'.¹⁷

and everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in Christ transformed

and recognised as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in Christ's light
we awaken as the Beloved
in every last part of our life.¹⁸

Mary's ears were open; she listened. She is first to hear the gospel, the first disciple. She fulfils the principle of ideal discipleship; that is 'to hear the word of God and to do it' (Luke 8:21). Her blessedness, said her son, is in her faithful response to God rather than in having borne him physically: 'Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it' (Luke 11:27–28). Mary's own movement of faith, not least her 'pondering in her heart' the events of her own life and that of her son symbolizes the path of faith for all of us. The immaculate conception and the assumption symbolize the prevenient grace and power of God going before us and following after us, transforming and lifting us into the communion of the saints, into the fullness of God. As Gerald May expresses it: 'Our search for God is seeded, borne, supported and accompanied by God's search for us'.¹⁹

In a sense we are all Mary, the humble recipients of God's grace, *anawim*, the poor of the Scriptures whose littleness enables us to accept life as gift, listening intently to its message. Perhaps the essential stance of all of us to life and in prayer is that of contemplation: 'We become Mary. Like Mary we wait, a yes on our lips, yet unknowing. Open and responsive to the transcendent reality within, we are made ready to hear and embrace the divine Word.'²⁰

Mary, liberator, revolutionary, champion of justice

And Mary praises with delight, 'My soul magnifies the Lord . . .'. The Magnificat is not a song of solace and comfort but one of challenge. Mary praises a God whom she intuitively is a God who acts in and for the poor and oppressed. The voice of the victim and the poor is the voice of God. So Mary in prophetic role is linked with social justice and liberation. This song of praise and of liberation is given more significance if the singer of it has been herself the witness to God's creative use of her own experience of victimization and suffering. Significant too that she sings it in the sympathetic presence

of another woman, two mothers sharing the great and new thing that God is doing in and through them. Is this another metaphor not only for women but for the whole Church?

Our membership of the human family and of the Body of Christ reminds us that our lives are set within a social context, calling us to love, to concern and to involvement. If spirituality is about the whole of life lived God-wards its fruit will be service in the world, which may often involve not only a social dimension but a political dimension. While Tissa Balasuriya criticizes a cult of Mary that has ignored the calls for social justice and for human liberation, many Asian and South American women have found Mary to be for them both liberated woman and liberator. This personal choice to become the mother of the messiah represents for them a political choice connected with the founding of a new community of freedom and wholeness, and her individual motherhood has been extended to social motherhood through her own suffering and revolutionary attitude and action.²¹ Women are right to struggle for justice everywhere whether in South America or Africa, Afghanistan or Pakistan, in synod and in the liturgy.

Mary's story holds a transforming power beyond our parochialism and privatized spiritualities. We need to struggle for justice or support others who do so, such as those who seek to bring sex tourism to an end so that children may cease to be debased, exploited and abused. Mary has given to the poor women of Latin America a *Madre De Los Desaparecidos*, a Mary who is no longer simply the glorious Queen of Heaven but also a mother, an elder sister and travelling companion in their desperate situation. What would be the knock-on effect if we embraced a Mary redefined in human liberationist terms as expressed in the following extract from an Asian Litany of Our Lady?

Mother of the liberator,
 Mother of the homeless,
 Mother of the dying,
 Mother of the non-violent,
 Widowed mother,
 Unwed mother,
 Mother of the political prisoner,
 Mother of the condemned.²²

NOTES

¹ Alice Walker, *Possessing the secret of joy* (London: Vintage, 1993).

² Mary Weisner, 'Luther and women: the death of two Marys' in Ann Loades (ed), *Feminist theology: a reader* (London: SPCK, 1990).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Thomas Ken, in *The new English hymnal* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1987), no. 182.

⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, 'God loves women' in Ann Loades (ed), *Spiritual classics from the late twentieth century* (London: National Society, 1995), p 47.

- ⁶ Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957), p 116.
- ⁷ Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary speech* (London: SCM, 1982), pp 2ff.
- ⁸ Maria Teresa Porcile Santiso, 'The new enthusiasm: a gift and power of the Spirit', a paper read at the USIG Conference, Rome, May 1993, pp 1–12.
- ⁹ Frank Griswold (quoting Father Benson of Cowley), 'Towards catholicity: naming and living the mystery' in *Living the mystery: Affirming Catholicism and the future of Anglicanism* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1994), p 23.
- ¹⁰ Kenneth Leech, *True God: an exploration in spiritual theology* (London: Sheldon Press, 1985), p 378.
- ¹¹ David Jackson quoting Philo, vol 2, tr F. H. Colson in Classical Library Series (Cambridge, MA: Loeb, 1979), p 39.
- ¹² Christopher Scott, *Between the poles: creative living between atheism and religion* (London: New Millenium, 1996), p 137.
- ¹³ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the sun again: introducing Asian women's theology* (London: SCM, 1990), pp 133f. See also Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp 213–40.
- ¹⁴ John Paul II, 'Letter to women' in *The Tablet* (15/7/95), pp 917–19.
- ¹⁵ Soskice, 'God loves women', p 62.
- ¹⁶ Griswold (quoting Father Benson of Cowley), 'Towards catholicity', p 24.
- ¹⁷ Sara Maitland, 'The Spirit of the thing' in *The Tablet* (21/12/96), p 1194.
- ¹⁸ Griswold (quoting Simeon the Theologian), 'Towards catholicity', p 147.
- ¹⁹ Gerald May, *Care of mind, care of spirit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p 33.
- ²⁰ Wendy Wright, 'The feminine dimension of contemplation' in Mary E. Giles (ed), *The feminine mystic: and other essays on women and spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p 108.
- ²¹ Chung, *Struggle to be the sun again*, p 80.
- ²² Heather Thomson, 'In the basement of a broken building: Chung Hyun Kyung and Asian feminist theology' in *Eremos magazine essay supplement*, 16 (Canberra, March 1994), p 13.