

MARY: MOTHER AND DISCIPLE

The Beatles final single was the McCartney song 'Let it Be'; it starts like this:

*When I find myself in times of trouble Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom, "Let it be".
And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me
Speaking words of wisdom, "Let it be."*

I guess many assumed this referred to the Virgin Mary and the comfort some believe she can bring when they are in distress. But it didn't. Paul was writing about his own mother whom he imagined coming and offering him support at a time when he was going through an "hour of darkness". He said, "I used to lie in bed and wonder what was going on and feel quite paranoid. I had a dream one night about my mother. She had died when I was 14, so I hadn't heard from her in quite a while, and it was very good. It gave me some strength. In my darkest hour, mother Mary had come to me."

But this morning my Mothering Sunday message is about the biblical Mother Mary. In churches like ours Mary usually only gets a mention at Christmas. In part, this is a reaction to the way she has been venerated by the Roman Catholic Church. To our understanding they have made the doctrine of *The Virgin Birth* the basis of other doctrines which go beyond Scripture, for example *The Perpetual Virginity of Mary*, and the *Immaculate Conception*. She has been proclaimed to be without sin, preserved from corruption, resurrected, received into heaven in glory and crowned "Queen of Heaven" where she has now assumed the roles of intercessor and mediator. She is *co-redemptrix* with Christ! As a result Protestants have been nervous about any focus on Mary.

But today, Mothering Sunday, we will take a fresh look at mother Mary. She was undoubtedly a remarkable woman and one who deserves a place of honour in human history. But instead of the birth narratives I propose to glance at four later episodes in Mary's life recorded in the Gospels. As we look at them we will see that she was as human as any mother. Most mothers here will identify with her. We will also see that she had a unique transition to make – from mother of Jesus to a disciple of Jesus. Maybe some of you are finding that this is a time of transition as you seek to follow Jesus.

Mary - at a wedding banquet in Cana

John 2v1,2. 'Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.' The newly-weds were evidently friends or relations of Mary. Jesus probably knew the couple personally. Those of his disciples who had recently been with John the Baptist would have found the atmosphere something of a contrast. No locusts and wild honey.

v3. 'When the wine had gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine.'" It is difficult for us to appreciate the implications of this. The most important ingredient in wedding banquet hospitality was wine. It was the symbol of joy and life to Jewish people. And it had run out. This was a serious crisis. It would involve social stigma. This was no trivial matter. So Mary is discreet. She quietly speaks to Jesus

telling him about the need. This is something every disciple of Jesus has to start doing - bringing every need to Him. When you or I hit a crisis, or some insurmountable problem, or we have friends in difficulty - bring the problem to Jesus.

But at first it didn't look like Jesus was going to do anything about it. **v4.** *"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come."* This is a characteristic expression of Jesus; it is usually associated with his death on the cross but here it seems to be more about His going public with miracles. I suspect there was something in his tone of voice or the look in his eye that Mary recognised. This is a mother who knows her son. **v5.** *"His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."* When we bring a need to Jesus we don't need to suggest the solution. Mary wasn't to know Jesus would change water into wine. Jesus is more creative than us.

Mary emerges from this story with real credit. She is making the transition to disciple. But there would be setbacks.

Mary - outside a crowded house in Galilee

Mark 3v20,21: *'Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." ... v31,32: Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."* Mary was over anxious and this made her vulnerable. Mothers here will understand this – in your loving concern feeling the urge to interfere or take back control. This can be a difficult transition for parents, especially mothers – letting go. On this occasion Jesus' family, including Mary, seem to feel they need to rescue Jesus. The pressure has got to him. Maybe he has even become a bit unhinged?

So what would Jesus do? After all, this was Mary the most honoured of mothers standing outside! **v33,34:** *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" Jesus asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister - and mother."* Readers new to the Gospels might be puzzled or even disturbed by this. It is as if Jesus is distancing himself from his family, even from his mother. Instead he is calling his circle of disciples his family. This is good news for every believer here – we are Jesus' family! But what does it say about Jesus' view of your natural family?

Let's be clear, Jesus is not undermining natural family relations. Whenever marriage or caring for parents was under threat Jesus was quick to affirm the family. But if family loyalty ever threatened the priority of the kingdom of God Jesus confronted it. This is one such occasion. Mary and his brothers were in danger of stifling what Jesus had come to do. Theologian Karl Barth wrote that Jesus was not questioning family relationships here: *'Rather it is one's captivity to these relationships that is questioned. Family structures can be a clannish imprisonment of the person no less than material possessions or worldly fame.'*

Family can pose some of the most serious challenges to your allegiance to Christ and your growth as a disciple. It may be straightforward opposition; choose Jesus or us - leave home! It may be selfish and insular family life where personal happiness is the goal – with just a little touch of God added. Or it may come in other ways. Jesus was totally uncompromising – even shocking, when family ties threatened to neutralize discipleship. Check out Matthew 10v34-39 and Luke 14v26 some time! This must have been a tough lesson for Mary. But she was making the transition from Jesus mother to his disciple. We all learn through failures. They may even be the most important way we learn.

Mary - near the cross at Golgotha

She was one of several women present when Jesus was crucified. This was the terrible fulfilment of elderly Simeon's prophecy in the Temple when Jesus was eight days old: **Luke 2v34,35:** *Then Simeon said to Mary his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."* At this moment she could not have appreciated fully the significance of all this; that this was God plan for the redemption of humanity. She was a mother. This was her son dying in agony. This was like a sword piercing her soul.

John 19v25: As well as Mary, her sister (called Salome according to Mark) was present. And there was another Mary who we think was her sister-in-law. Then there was Mary Magdalene. Women have often been the most loyal disciples - devoted to Jesus. Today we are not just honouring mothers - but all women who are radical disciples of Jesus.

According to Rodney Stark, in *'The Rise of Christianity'* women were in the majority in the early church. Christianity was unusually appealing to women in the first centuries AD even though men greatly outnumbered women at that time. Along with the power of the gospel message there were sociological reasons for women being drawn to being disciples of Jesus.

One reason for women being in short supply was that males were valued above females. If a baby girl was born (or a deformed male) the law allowed "infanticide" i.e. parents were able to "expose" the child until it died. According to Francis Elliott the 'Times' correspondent in Delhi, sex selective abortions and female infanticide are currently distorting the gender balance of the Indian population. The news article was headed *'"Genocide" of girls grows as doctors and parents ignore ban on gender selection'*. It is estimated that within two decades there will be 20% more males than females in India. ('The Times' Friday April 1st 2011) In the first century AD many women were drawn to the church because Christians stood against this. They enjoyed a far higher status in the church than in the Greco-Roman world at large. They were treated as equals not inferiors.

Women were also fewer because of high death rates in childbirth. Abortion was common and it was also barbaric; and it could be commanded by a husband – the woman had no choice. Many women died at the hands of abortionists or were unable to bear more children. Again the church took a stand against this and women

were protected and healthy lives saved. As a result Christian women produced more children at a time when the birth rate in the empire was falling. This also contributed to the rapid growth the church.

Women also enjoyed greater marital security because Christianity challenged male biased divorce, marital infidelity and polygamy. It was common in Roman society for girls as young as 11 or 12 years to be given to older husbands. This did not happen within the church - young women were able to marry at a later stage.

And at the other end of the spectrum widows were not cast aside but were treated with respect and cared for. We see this in the care Jesus showed for his mother even while he suffered in agony. **John 19v26, 27:** *'When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.'* This was the apostle John. As well as a beloved disciple John was also Jesus' cousin, because his mother was Mary's sister.

Caring for women and challenging immoral behaviour and treating women as equals was at the heart of the rapid growth of the early church. It could still be today in lands where women are treated abysmally. Christianity also spread because the abundance of believing females attracted men - at a time when they were in short supply everywhere else. Men were therefore drawn into the orbit of the church and many came to faith.

Mary - in an upper room in Jerusalem:

This is after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. **Acts 1v12-14:** *'Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.'*

One of the errors surrounding Mary is that we need her to pray for us to her Son. Do you get any hint of this in Acts 1? On the contrary Mary is named and numbered alongside the other disciples and women. She is a disciple. She is giving herself to prayer. She is in this upper room in Jerusalem waiting for the promised Holy Spirit like everyone else. And no doubt she was present on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit fell on all that were gathered in that upper room.

Mary was the mother of Jesus, and in that she was unique and blessed among women. But she was also a disciple and as such was the same as everyone here who follows Jesus.

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