

Trinity College Cambridge  
2 February 2014  
Candlemas

**PEOPLE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**  
**MARY**

Isaiah 61: 10–end    Revelation 11: 19 – 12: 6, 10

The Right Revd and Right Hon. Richard Chartres  
The Bishop of London

In honouring Mary as the mother of the Lord, all generations have echoed the greeting of Elizabeth ‘Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus’. In the Church of England the song of Mary, the Magnificat, is at the heart of Evensong as we have heard this evening .

Jesus Christ was born of a woman and, in defence of Christ’s humanity, the early Church insisted on the birth of Jesus from Mary. He did not just *appear* to be human. In the words of the Nicene Creed, confirmed in 381 at a Council in Constantinople, Jesus Christ ‘was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man’. At the same time in defence of his true divinity, the Church has insisted that Mary was in the Prayer Book phrase ‘a pure virgin’.

As meditation on the unity of Christ’s person developed, Mary’s title of *theotokos*, ‘god-bearer’, was widely adopted to affirm the oneness of Christ’s person by identifying Mary as the Mother of God the Word-made-flesh. It is still possible to stand in the ruins of the very church in Ephesus where Mary was declared Theotokos at the Council of 431.

By 431 of course devotion to Mary was already well established. The ancient Armenian invocation – ‘Our Holy Mother of endless light, you who carried the eternal God in your blessed womb and gave birth to the joy of this world, we beseech you’ – is one which resonates with universal Christian tradition. I think of John Donne, the Dean of St Paul’s, and his verse about the Virgin birth in which he hails ‘immensity cloistered in thy dear womb’.

From 1561 the calendar of the Church of England contained five feasts associated with Mary including the one we celebrate today, ‘*The Presentation*’. One of those rare bishops who managed to combine sanctity with episcopacy, Lancelot Andrewes, drew on the liturgies of the Eastern Church to express a warm and profound devotion to Mary in his *Preces Privatae*. In his private prayers he commemorated the ‘all-holy immaculate more than blessed mother of God and ever virgin Mary’.

But elsewhere in the West the role accorded to the Blessed Virgin was part of the contention between the fragmented parts of the Latin Church – the Old Western Church which split apart with such tumultuous consequences in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Reformers asserted that the role of Mary had been inflated and that she was being regarded almost as a co-mediatrix. This development occurred as Christ was increasingly seen as a terrifying celestial judge whose severity required the intercession of the Virgin. Critics claimed that Mary was no longer as she is in the icon tradition ‘hodegetria’ – the one who shows the way and points to Christ – but rather she had come to dominate the centre of the picture. It is easy to see how artistic developments in the Renaissance exacerbated these trends. Icons of Mary in the Byzantine tradition were written to convey profound points of Christ-centred doctrine, but when a more naturalistic style focussed on real mothers and babies the door was opened to role reversal.

I recently received a letter which recalled the times of conflict but which also contained a promise of hope. The letter alerted me to the statue of Nuestra Senora la Inglesa in the Cathedral Church of Mondonedo, Galicia – a polychrome statue of the virgin said to have been expelled from St Paul’s by my predecessor Bishop Ridley. Such objects of piety were frequently taken down to the docks and sold to Spanish merchants, so there is nothing implausible in the story of the origin of the statue. It has been preserved in Galicia having been rescued from a cultural revolution here in the 1550s and surviving the Civil War there in the 1930s. My correspondent expressed the hope that ‘the awareness and subsequent veneration of the statue, a common heritage of Anglicans and Catholics, might serve to encourage with her intercession, better understanding between the two churches.’

The letter illustrates the way in which Christian traditions are accessible to one another in an unprecedented way. Progress has been made for example in the joint Anglican-Roman Catholic report entitled ‘Mary; Grace and Hope in Christ’, published on the occasion of this festival in 2004. But for the future, the way to enter into our common heritage is by humility and a diminution of egotism in the power of the Holy Spirit who initiates us into the love which passes eternally between the Father and the beloved Son. In other words we should follow the way of Our Lady herself.

To be filled with the love and the Spirit of God we must be empty enough to listen and wait upon God. Much religious practice in every tradition, by contrast, is a busy matter of making God in our own image. This is why the prophets ceaselessly condemn idolatry. There is always a temptation for the bruised ego to surreptitiously re-ascend to embrace a projection of ourselves and, most dangerously, our anger and lust for power. God so loved the world, but listening to some of his self-appointed partisans – the preachers of unorthodox orthodoxy – you would never believe it. As the poet Rilke said of God, ‘You have such a quiet manner of existence that those who name you with a loud insistence show they’ve forgotten your proximity’. Mary was quiet, aware and receptive; she was present enough to be found by the messenger of God and filled with the Holy Spirit.

We are involved in a drama whose author is God, who so loved the world that he was generous and gave himself in the person of Jesus Christ. The drama is described in the Holy Scriptures. Beneath and beyond the doings of kings and the movement of armies

there is a deep story of annunciations to obscure folk who are the chosen vessels, called to advance God's plan for the world. In the cool of the day He calls out Adam: where are you? Abraham, Abraham, leave your household gods and all that is familiar and journey to a land you do not know but which I shall show you. Then in the Temple, when the rumour of God was very faint and the stream of inspiration was low, Samuel – Samuel was called to be a prophet. In the year that King Uzziah died, the call came to Isaiah who said, "here am I, send me". Supremely there was the annunciation to Mary: 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.'

But if we are caught up into the love of God for the world, we are also caught up into the agony of God as he contemplates the world that he has made, torn apart by the ravages of sin. Sin is the condition which makes us unaware. Sin is living turned in upon ourselves; in self-centredness which cannot hear or see Gabriel when he comes, as he does most days, and still less can say, "be it unto me according to thy word". But with awareness comes also the sword, which pierces the heart with agony, as we see in Christ how we have disfigured the earth and ourselves. Who could fail to share Mary's agony for the children and the suffering people of Syria and for the fragmented state of the Church. Agony and joy are bound up with one another in the Christian life. But the first and last word is that 'God so loved the world', and we sing with joy with the Blessed Virgin, 'my soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour, for He hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.'