

MARY, PROFILE OF A MOTHER

TEXT: Luke 1:4b-55

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is perhaps the most revered woman in history. I don't know if any of you are "Jeopardy" fans, but a while back the Final Jeopardy question asked the contestants to name one of the two women who have been featured on the cover of *Time* magazine the most times. Only one of the contestants got it right, and named Mary as one of the two. In case you're wondering, the second was Princess Di. Here are two most honored women, whose lives were lived 2000 years apart. We probably know more about Princess Di than we really need, or want, to know. But what about Mary? Mary, the mother of Jesus, the most revered woman in history, remains historically largely unknown, having long been obscured behind Christian devotion and the legends that have been woven around her name.

Luke depicts Mary as a devout & humble woman, ready to do God's will. She had been brought up on the vow of Samuel's mother, Hannah, who in her humble, prayerful supplication before her son's birth (as we read in I Samuel) bequeathed to all mothers the example of what a handmaid of the Lord should be.

More than any of her forerunners or her contemporaries, Mary understood what the servanthood of God implied. She was a true daughter of Israel; she was familiar with Isaiah's servant songs. In her own approaching motherhood, she seemed to give new meaning to the 123rd Psalm: "Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress, so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God; until that he have mercy upon us."

How little we think about servanthood today. But is there a mother among us who has not been in the role of servant as she goes about her life taking care of her home, ministering to her children, serving her church and community, often while putting in 40-50 hours a week to make ends meet for her family?

We first meet Mary as a young woman living in Nazareth, a city in Galilee, a small region in northern Palestine. It was a small, secluded village, not on any main highway. Daily life for inhabitants in that rural setting was probably much like rural life today. Marriages were arranged at that time by family members with the help and advice of friends, and her betrothed was a carpenter whose trade may have brought him to Nazareth for a time.

Unexpectedly, during her year of waiting for the marriage to be finalized, Mary became pregnant. When the angel announced to Mary that she would bear the heir to the throne of David, she must have wondered how it could happen, since she was a virgin. But she made no protest, showing her willingness to be “the handmaid of the Lord”. Her main characteristic – which marks every account of her – is humble and quiet devotion to God.

Mary, now the most privileged among women, learned from the very beginning that exceptional privilege often goes hand in hand with sacrifice. The first thing she sacrificed was her reputation. She exchanged this in order to be available to God. But this created a problem for Joseph, her fiancé. He was a man who walked with God. How could he possibly marry a girl who was expecting a baby by someone else? Because he loved her, Joseph’s plan was to leave Mary quietly, not putting her through the public humiliation of divorce. What made him change his mind? We know about the angel’s visit to Joseph, telling him that he, too, had been chosen to parent the special child. So Joseph married Mary, despite the shame that accompanied her name, sacrificing some personal happiness in exchange for the privilege of being the earthly father to the Christ.

We are so familiar with the story of the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of her child, and all that went with it. Which mother here today cannot recall all the events that surrounded her introduction to motherhood? Even without angels, shepherds and wise men, each birth is an exciting event and is heralded by family and friends.

Surely the stigma that had been attached to Mary and Joseph was forgotten in the joy of the birth of their son.

Although nothing is told to us about Jesus' first formative years, we can surely imagine some of what Mary must have done in her role as his mother. She would have nursed the infant Jesus, holding him gently in her arms and hoping, as every mother does, for a happy and long life for her child. Surely she must have sung to him – silly songs to make him laugh and soft songs to make him sleep. Like all parents, she and Joseph would have found joy in his every new accomplishment: the first time he sat alone, his first steps, his first words. As Jesus grew older and more independent, his quick mind and sensitive spirit must have made them proud of their son.

After the accounts of Jesus' birth, Mary is mentioned only a few times in the New Testament. Three of these passages indicate that Jesus prized other relations above family.

Jesus was but a young boy when his parents took him to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Passover in the Holy City. It was a happy occasion for they were in the company of old friends they only met on such festive days. There were many families visiting Jerusalem and it was teeming with children. The families walked and talked loudly with each other in the streets and the children danced and played together. Naturally assuming that Jesus was in the company of others in their group, Joseph and Mary did not discover until after a full, tiring day on the homeward journey that Jesus was not with them. Returning to Jerusalem they searched everywhere for him, without success. Then, after three days of searching, Jesus was found in the Temple asking questions with intelligence and understanding.

Today we might say that Jesus was a “precocious” child. He didn't intend to worry his parents; he was just caught up in his opportunity to pursue his interest. What mother would not have scolded her child in her relief to find him safe. Have not most of us, as normal children, done things that sent fear, or even panic, into our

parents? Have not our children, however innocently, put us in a state of panic, when they were not where we expected them to be? And, like Mary, our reactions are usually both anger at their seeming uncaring, tempered by relief that they are, at last, safe. Jesus' reply to his mothers scolding was not unfriendly, but was clear and without reserve, "You shouldn't have had to search. Didn't you know I would be in my Father's house?" At this early age the ties between Jesus and his family had already begun to loosen.

According to Mark, at one point Jesus' mother and brothers, perhaps concerned about him, stood outside where they sent a message to him. He replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" and, looking around at his followers, added "here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister and mother." Matthew reflects this critical attitude toward family as well, quoting Jesus saying "I have come to set a man against his father...He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me..."

Can we understand a mother's discomfort, even hurt, as she sees her child not only growing away from the family circle, but making known that the family is to be secondary to other interests? But I believe we can say that Mary's maternal love, devotion and fidelity gave Jesus new safeguards in his great mission. It began with his mother, Mary, in whose religious thoughts, prophetic hopes, and moral values, he and his band of followers gained a new image of woman at her best. Because he learned from her as a child, and she learned even more from him during his ministry, Mary was able to touch other lives in depth, as he had touched hers after he grew to manhood.

There is no information in the Bible about the rest of Mary's life. Although we are told in the New Testament that Jesus had brothers and sisters, we know little about them, save that Mark names four of the brothers – James, Joses, Judas and Simon.

Except for a few brief episodes – Jesus’ disappearance in Jerusalem at the age of twelve, and the wedding feast at Cana, Mary is not mentioned again until she stands at the foot of the cross. John is the only one of the four gospels that indicates her presence at the crucifixion. We know that Mary stayed at the cross. Most of us can remember our emotional hurts that came from the traumas of our children. We agonized with them when they had difficult decisions to make; we physically shared in the pain of scraped knees or perhaps broken collarbones. We know how connected mothers are with the agonies of their children. But can we experience with Mary the horror of listening to her son’s cries of agony, watching his blood drop from his wounds and no doubt feeling every throbbing pain? I would imagine Mary feeling that if her presence could compensate even a little for his suffering and aloneness, she would give him that comfort.

And it is here that we see the great love and concern Jesus had for his mother. First he addressed her saying “Woman, behold your son!” He followed that with words to John, the disciple whom he loved, saying “Behold, our mother!”, emphasizing that Jesus wanted to make sure someone he trusted and loved would continue to care for his mother.

Mary, the Mother, bore Jesus’ pain and heartache as she walked with him all the way to Calvary. And yet we hear not a murmur from her. She seemed to perceive to the fullest his great mission and why his accusers demanded death.

We read one more reference to Mary in the book of Acts and this leads to the belief that she and Jesus’ brothers became part of the Church. Our last glimpse of Mary is not at the cross but as one of those gathered in prayer in the upper room waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit. That which started out so beautifully also ended beautifully for Mary as she came to know the risen Christ in the community of the Church.

Never for one moment did Mary falter in her obedience to God, even when she knew that she must suffer the pain of criticism from those who did not understand the wonder of her approaching pregnancy. She alone understood that the Holy Spirit had come upon her and that the child to be born to her would be the Son of God.

After her son grew to manhood and entered upon his healing and preaching ministry, she never sought to be known as the mother of the great Messiah, but only as the handmaid of the Lord. She understood that she, like her son, was sent to do the will of her Father.

As she witnessed the exemplary life that Jesus set before his disciples and his followers, she was prepared for the tremendous sacrifices that he made as he went among the poor and needy, as he healed the sick, as he carried his cross to Golgotha. She understood better than others no doubt why he never thought of self, why he never accumulated possessions, why he never had a family of his own or owned a house, and why he was content to live a solitary life.

Mary became a mature woman. In the last thirty years of her life, I believe she reached unknown pinnacles of happiness. At the same time she experienced deep sorrows which no woman ever has or ever will encounter. But her attitude toward God never changed. She had proven with her life that she meant the words she spoke when the Messiah was announced, "I am the Lord's servant, and I will do whatever He desires."

It is no wonder that Mary, this true handmaid of the Lord, has made such a significant contribution to the history of women – and the history of humankind – and that she stands at the pivotal point in history, where noble women of early Israel had paved the way for her, and where she in turn would inspire many who would follow.

Mary's example teaches that a handmaid of God walks not in darkness but in light. She knows how to sustain with a word those who are weary. She brings good tidings

to the afflicted and binds the wounds of the brokenhearted. She comforts those who mourn and bestows praise upon the fainthearted. She keeps her tongue from evil and her lips from speaking guile. She worships God in the beauty of holiness, never doubting his faithfulness. She cannot be discouraged, because she is confident that God holds her by the hand, that his spirit is upon her, and that she has been called to righteousness.

Mary is the symbol of saintly womanhood, obedient servanthood and, most of all, self-sacrificing and loving motherhood. We will never be called upon to make the sacrifices that she made to readily accept God's call for her, or to subjugate our own lives and ambitions for the sake of God's plan. But as we look at the life of the one so chosen, we can see that she is everywoman – she is a part of every mother throughout history. With faith, loyalty and love she raised a child who was to become the greatest man in history. Despite history's penchant for relegating her to the role of "saint" she is a mother to be remembered for her piety, honored for her faithfulness, and perhaps most of all, revered as a symbol of mothers for all generations to come.