

Sweet Mary. Holy Mary. Humble and willing Mary. These are the images we have of Mary, the mother of our Lord, who was so willing to do what God asked her to do. We know that all those who do God's will are Blessed. Mary did God's will. Mary suffered. Through the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary we learn again that hard lesson. We hope that if we do the right thing we will be rewarded, we will be blessed. But things don't always turn out the way we would have them turn out. Certainly we are blessed, but that isn't a shield that will protect us from all harm, unfortunately.

The Gospel reading that we heard just now from Luke is not the one that is appointed for the Feast of the Mother of our Lord. It is the one assigned for the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. But it is actually quite appropriate for our bittersweet look at Mary, the revered and adored saint of the Christian Church.

August 15<sup>th</sup> has been the date to honor Mary since the 7<sup>th</sup> century. And if you look in your prayer book at the church calendar on page 26 you can see that our church celebrates St. Mary day, and it is considered a major feast of our church. What is not mentioned in our calendar is that this feast is called the **Assumption of the BVM** in the Catholic and Orthodox and Oriental Christian churches. For those of you without a Roman Catholic background assumption means to be taken bodily into heaven.

The history of how the Assumption came to be so important is kind of interesting. From Sacred Tradition, in other words, not from scripture, comes the story that Mary lived out her days in Jerusalem, or perhaps Ephesus, and at the end of her life, the blessed Mary was taken in bodily form up to heaven as a fulfillment of the promise that Jesus has prepared a place for her. Catholic theologians still debate whether that assumption happened before or after Mary died.

We Episcopalians have dropped the word assumption from our celebration of the feast because of the lack of scriptural evidence for that belief, but we have not dropped the word virgin. Luke's Gospel records that Mary said to the angel, "How can this be since I am a virgin." For some this has never been something to question. For others this is a difficult part of scripture to accept. But Mary virginity is not necessarily connected to a specific physical condition. It doesn't particularly matter how Mary became pregnant. It is part of the mystery of faith. But what I can say with some certainty is that what was virginal about Mary was her openness to hear to God's word, her willingness to be the theotokos (which means God bearer in Greek) and her willingness to face difficulties that would arise because of her youth, her betrothal and her pregnancy. These things could have led her to being a social outcast in her rigid Jewish community.

Mary is considered a perfect heroine and saint to generations and generations of devout Christians. I remember a friend of mine was a R.C. and she would come home from her Sunday School talking about the Blessed Mary this, and the Blessed Mary that. She had a rosary and wrote prayers to Mary, and had prayer cards with pictures of Mary. I remember being quite jealous that she had a beautiful motherly saint to pray too and we just had a very plain church with clear windows and no sculptures of anyone let alone Mary. It's interesting that the roman church with its all male hierarchy has such a major focus on a female saint.

But for us today, we will focus not on Mary the heroine and theotokos, but Mary the suffering servant who was like us. She experienced joy and disappointment like any mother, hopes and unfulfilled expectations, rejection, and the most agonizing thing imaginable, watching the death of one's own child.

Like all mothers, she must have felt so elated at some points in her motherhood, and so deflated at other points. Jesus was a boy, after all. And boys can be a handful!

We first hear of Jesus in scripture having a mind and will of his own when, as a teenager, he stayed behind in the temple as his family was leaving the city after a celebration of a Jewish festival in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph run all the way back to the city when they finally realized he was not with them, and Mary had some choice words for Jesus recorded in Luke's Gospel when she finally found him. **"Didn't you know that we were worried sick about you?"** **Yea, well, you should have known where to find me, mom."** Oy vey!

Then, as a young man, Jesus and his mother attended a wedding in Cana, a story from the Gospel of John. And when Mary made a request of her son, he seemed rather harsh to her by saying, **"Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour has not yet come."** (John 2:4)

There is another scene found in Matthew's gospel. There are different interpretations of this scene, but one is that Jesus rejects his mother and his family: **"Someone told Jesus, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"** (Matt 12:47-48) Jesus uses this as a teaching moment, and opportunity to say to the people assembled that everyone who does God's will is his mother and sister and brother.

And then there is the passage we have today from Luke's Gospel. The portion of chapter 12 we heard does seem a bit disjointed. Almost as if Luke put these together because of the subject matter rather than to form a good narrative. Luke may have been using these words of Jesus for the benefit of his own congregation. Mary might have hoped that Jesus would say something kind about their family. He might thank his mother and his family for all the support and love they have shown him through the years. But those are not words Luke cares to record from Jesus. Instead Luke writes about when Jesus talked about the divisions that must and will occur in the lives of Christian disciples.

Why division and not peace? This seems to be so counter-intuitive to what Jesus teaches us. Is this the way to love our neighbor as ourselves? It seems so disparaging of families when we

know from the Jewish traditions that respect within the family unit was an extremely important part of 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel.

But, Jesus is just acknowledging that conflict will happen when we adopt a new way of life. In this new world order that Jesus has introduced, the powerful will yield to the humble, fear must succumb to courage and self-righteousness will give way to forgiveness and mercy. This may not sit well in the traditional family of the day, and it may not sit well in our families today.

But Jesus does love his mother. That is clear. At the end of his earthly ministry, as he hung from the cross, Jesus spoke to his mother and to the beloved disciple, John. He said to his mother, **"Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother."** **And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19:26-27 )**

Even in the last moments of his life Jesus was concerned about others. He was concerned about his mother. He wanted to know that she would be well taken care of in John's household.

Yes, Mary suffered greatly in her life. She certainly didn't think when she handed over her will to God that awful events would follow. We believe that if we do what God asks us to do that things will turn out well for us. But they don't always turn out the way we want. As for Mary, well Mary lived to see her son resurrected and the Christian faith spreading throughout Palestine and beginning to go out to the ends of the earth.

Joy and sorrow together. Mary is like us. It helps us understand our lives to think on Mary's life. On one of the most joyous days that Mary must have experienced as a mother – the day that the baby Jesus was taken to the temple to be blessed and named, the old priest Simeon spoke very prophetic words:

**“Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-- and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Luke 2:34-35**