



4th Sunday in Advent Year A: Blessed be the Mother of God, Mary most holy

Homily by Fr Robbie Low

Readings: Isaiah 35: 1-6, 10, Ps 145, James 5: 7-10, Matthew 11: 2-11

Today, the fourth Sunday in Advent, we focus on Our Lady.

This is a subject, as you will appreciate, very dear to my heart, though for very different reasons to most of you sitting in the pews. I come from a background of non-attending, anti- Catholic Protestantism. The family attitude could best be summed up by that old Presbyterian joke that runs, 'It is such a pity that our dear Lord's mother was a Roman Catholic.' It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that Mary was almost regarded as an enemy of the Faith.

Also there was a tendency to send up the apparent Roman obsession with this 'minor' Biblical character. I remember at Theological College (seminary) that those who had a devotion to Our Lady were dismissed as having 'Roman Fever'. A visiting speaker spoke of his time with the

Eskimos who were RCs. How amusing it was that all their churches were called Our Lady – as in ‘Our Lady where the bears ate the children’ or ‘Our Lady of the drowned fishermen’ . How we laughed at their benighted superstition.

The first time I had to question my carefully crafted cultural opposition to this strange devotion of Left Footers was when I heard a Baptist minister preach on the subject. How, he wanted to know, could we claim to be Biblical servants of God if we ignored the Magnificat and its prophecy, ‘All generations shall call me blessed’. He had, he said, never heard anyone in a Protestant church refer to Mary as Blessed. Why not? I need hardly add that he was not invited again.

Then there was the sudden appearance of a book by a leading Methodist preacher entitled, ‘Five for sorrow, Ten for joy’ all about how helpful he found the repetitive, rattling rosary stuff. Extraordinary. Then there was the difficult to gainsay evidence on the ground. These poor superstitious souls remarkably seemed to turn up unfailingly on the right side of the argument on every moral and social issues of our time – often clutching their prayer beads and rattling them off.

The C of E, of which by then I was an ordained minister, showed no such consistency of ethics or undergirding doctrine. My long battle with the Establishment and my questioning of its claim to any kind of Catholicity had yet to begin.

I had also yet to encounter the Scriptural reality of the place of Mary in Salvation History.

The two stumbling blocks for me were the Papacy and Our Lady. No chance of me becoming a ROMAN Catholic then.

The problem of the Papacy was resolved over many years and at the same time in the twinkling of an eye. St John Paul II showed how it could

be done but the real clincher was at the other end of the scale in what I call, 'The miracle of the Papacy'. There have been Popes who have been saints, Popes who have been pretty ordinary and Popes who have been utter 'stinkers'. The miracle was that even the utter 'stinkers' never sought to change the doctrine of the Faith to accommodate their own failings. In the C of E if enough people were committing that sin, then with sufficient secular and State pressure, the Synodal process would, by a demonic democracy, overturn the historic faith and enthroned the error.

Our Lady took a longer road but, in the end a similar moment of revelation when all the pieces came together and the heart responded to what the head already knew.

It had become apparent that, for Jesus to be the sinless Son of God it was necessary to have a sinless Mother to complement the holiness of the Father. Hence the fundamental logic of the Immaculate Conception.

That there was no resting place for the physical body of Mary nor ever a trade in her, what would have been, priceless relics, pointed to the Assumption.

That she gave the Church its motto at the Cana wedding – 'Do whatever Jesus tells you'.

That Jesus, from the Cross, gives His Mother to the Beloved Disciple – John & you & me – and exhorts us to take her to our home, is eloquent of the nature of the Christian Family and our connectedness.

Hence the Councils declare her 'Mother of the Church'.

That Jesus claims the Divine Name – 'I AM' - for Himself is merely underlined by the Church's proclamation the Mary is therefore the Mother of God.

That no-one can be closer to the Divine than she who brought the Incarnate Word, the One by whom all things were created, into the World in obedience to the Angelic Annunciation, gives her priority and supremacy over all other saints.

That the maiden of Nazareth should be visited by the Holy Spirit - as the Church would later be at its creation at the Pentecost to be the Body of Christ in the world – and that, in her obedience, the Christ should incarnate and be presented to the world makes her the model and ikon of the Church.

All this was falling into place but stubbornness or wilful blindness still militated against the obvious conclusion of these overwhelming truths.

What finally ‘flipped’ it was a trivial but simple sign.

I had been visiting Rachel John, the old Catholic Historian and Cornish Bard, when she offered me a choice of books and religious objects that she was clearing out. I chose an old Rosary.

It was, she said, her Father’s (with whom she has written the Penguin Dictionary of Saints). It was also a Catacomb Rosary, hollow and filled with dust from the same places of hiding in the three century long persecution. The little silver screw that secured the back was lost but time and corrosion had rusted it securely shut. It would not open.

Several months later I was alone, back in my Anglican parish praying in the recently restored Lady Chapel. I took the Rosary out of my cassock pocket to ‘give it a long overdue outing’.

As I was praying the mystery, I heard a tiny ping on the floor a few feet away from me. Naturally curious, I stopped the prayers and went forward to look.

There, on the floor two pews up, was a tiny silver screw. Holding my breath, I tried it in the long vacant slot in the old Rosary. I need hardly tell you the rest. The following year in Rome I bought the remaining few Catacomb Rosaries for family and friends (they don't do them any more) and verified that the miraculous silver screw was identical to the ones in Rome.

Our Lady had convinced me intellectually, secretly encouraged me by the long patient prayers of Catholic friends and finally prepared me for the next step of the journey in her own chapel where, as it turned out, you could hear the proverbial pin drop.

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