

Mary, the mother of Jesus. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 21 January 2015.

This is the second talk in a series about Bible characters who feature in the gospels of the New Testament. Last week, Jonathan began our series by introducing us to an elderly couple from Jerusalem who are mentioned in only one passage in the gospels – to Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist.

This week our character study could hardly be more different. This morning we focus, not on an elderly couple, but on a single young girl ... not from the city of Jerusalem in Judea, but from the small village of Nazareth in Galilee.

We focus not on Zacharias and Elizabeth, chosen by God to be the parents of John the Baptist, but on Mary, chosen by God to be the mother of one infinitely greater than John – chosen to be the mother of Jesus ... on one who appears not only (as they) at the very outset of the gospel story, but who features often throughout that story, and, indeed, of whom we read even after the close of all four gospels.

Not only was her name ('Mary', the equivalent of the Old Testament name Miriam) by far the most popular lady's name in Israel, both generally in her day and age, and on the pages of the New Testament – which pages refer to no less than six separate Mary's¹ – but we told far more of this Mary than of any other lady in the entire New Testament.

But not only was Mary the most popular Jewish lady's name in her day, and not only are we told more of this Mary than of any other lady in the New Testament, but, because of the unique role she filled as the mother of the Lord Jesus, she ranks as by far the most important woman in the whole of human history.

Small wonder that, on account of her role as the mother of Jesus, she is spoken of as 'blessed' four times in the opening chapter of Luke's gospel – once by the angel Gabriel,² twice by her close relative Elisabeth,³ and once by herself.⁴ Mary's own words, 'from now on all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me', form part of her great song of praise traditionally called 'The Magnificat' from its opening words, 'My soul *magnifies* the Lord'.⁵

I read some time ago of one bright Sunday School scholar who answered a question about our Lord's birth with the astounding claim that, 'When Mary heard that she was to be the mother of Jesus, she sang the Magna Carta!' But, truth is, that the inspiration for the so-called Magnificat (the coming into the world of God's Son) eclipses by far both the cause and the content of the charter issued by King John over 1200 years later.

And it is important to note that, though we told more of Mary than of any other lady in the New Testament, we never read of her other than in connection with the Lord Jesus. The New Testament knows nothing of her supposed 'immaculate conception', her supposed 'perpetual virginity', or her supposed 'Assumption into heaven'. But it does draw attention to *many* episodes in her life, spanning from when she was a young teenager⁶ to when she reached middle age.⁷

And every time we meet her she is associated one way or another with our Lord – whether:

- (a) in the context of the stupendous stoop He took at His incarnation;⁸
- (b) in the context of His dedication in the Temple when He was 40 days old;⁹ or
- (c) in the context of the visit to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast when He was twelve years old – when she and Joseph had hunted for Him frantically before finding Him after three days where they should have looked for Him first, in His *real* Father's house (the Temple), and occupied with His *real* Father's business.¹⁰

Yes, every time we meet her she is associated one way or another with our Lord – whether:

- (d) in the context of His willing submission to her and to Joseph for many years at Nazareth;¹¹
- (e) in the context of the first miraculous sign which He performed in turning water into wine at a marriage at Cana;¹²
- (f) in the context of the occasion some eighteen months later in Capernaum when He needed to explain to her and to others that the spiritual ties which linked Him to His disciples who did God's will ranked even higher than the natural ties which linked Him to His earthly family – that faith and not family was the basis for the closest relationship to Him;¹³ or
- (g) in the context of His cross, concerning which we read, 'Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother'.¹⁴

And, separately, Mary is associated with our Lord (h) in the context of the time when, following His resurrection and ascension, as He commanded, she met together with the apostles in the upper room to pray prior to the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.¹⁵

O yes, every time we meet Mary on the pages of the New Testament she is associated one way or another with our Lord Jesus.

We can safely say that Mary is the only person who enjoyed a close relationship with the Lord Jesus from the very beginning to the very end of His human life on earth.¹⁶

Let's think for a few moments of the 'end of His human life on earth', of the scene of our Lord's crucifixion. John tells us in his gospel (and I quote) :

Standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!"¹⁷ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.¹⁸

Although there were four women standing by the cross, John tells us that Jesus had eyes for only one – that He 'saw His mother' ... as, from His cross, He looked into the face of the woman of whom it was prophesied at the time of our Lord's dedication in the temple some 33 years before that, metaphorically, 'a sword will pierce through your own soul'.¹⁹ And today was the day!

Perhaps, just for a moment, the Lord remembered the time He had entered the world through her womb ... perhaps He recalled the time when she had watched Him grow up as an infant... perhaps He thought of the thirty years they had shared together in lowly Nazareth. I do not know.

But I do know that His mother had now reached an age at which, in normal circumstances, she would have looked to Him, her first-born Son, for support. But, instead, she was compelled by her very love for Him to stand and witness Him suffer the humiliating and agonising death of a condemned criminal. Surely misery was written across His mother's face as she stood there ... helpless. His wounds bled and she could do nothing to staunch the blood. His mouth was parched and she could do nothing to moisten it. Arms which had once gently clasped her neck were outstretched out on the cross-beam and she was unable to caress them.

Doubtless He knew that every lash of the soldier's scourge had made her wince – that she had felt each iron spike driven through His hands and feet – that every taunt and cheap jibe flung in His teeth had wounded and stung her too. Oh yes, He knew that His mother certainly didn't feel 'blessed among women' now!

And He knew that she must be provided for. And so, with His *words* – if not with His *eyes* also – He directed her gaze towards John, and John's gaze towards her ... 'behold, your son ... behold, your mother'.

And with those few words the Saviour accomplished at least two things.

First, without actually saying it, He charged John to take Mary into his care – which it seems that John did immediately. For, as we read, '*from that hour* that disciple took her to his own home'.²⁰

But I suggest that, second, His words, 'Woman, behold, your son' were also, in effect, His 'farewell', His 'goodbye'. For, as I understand them, they marked the close of the earthly relationship which He and Mary had shared for a third of a century.

It is, of course, quite likely that Mary and the Lord met again – during the 'forty days' when, according to the New Testament, 'He showed Himself alive' to His disciples 'after His passion'.²¹ Certainly, as we noted earlier, Mary was present at the 'upper-room' prayer meeting immediately following the Lord's ascension.²²

Yet even if Mary *did* meet the Saviour during that forty-day period after He burst out of the tomb, their relationship would have been very different then.²³ For then her role had shifted from being the mother of Jesus to being a disciple of Jesus. To her, He would then no longer be her son; He would be her living Lord and Saviour – a relationship which, praise God, is equally open to each of us here today through faith in Him.

Footnotes

¹ The six are: (a) Mary, the mother of Jesus; (b) Mary Magdalene; (c) Mary, the wife of Clopas, the mother of James and Joses, Matt. 27. 55-56; Mark 15. 40-41, John 19. 25; (d) Mary of Bethany; (e) Mary, the mother of John Mark, Acts 12. 12; (f) Mary of Rome, Rom. 16. 6.

² Luke 1. 28.

³ Luke 1. 42, 45.

⁴ Luke 1. 48.

⁵ From the Latin word for 'magnifies'. Clearly, young Mary's mind was saturated with the spirit and phraseology of the Old Testament. By some counts, there are 10 quotations of and/or allusions to the Old Testament in the Magnificat.

⁶ 'In ancient Israel, girls married in their teens, even early teens. For Mary to be betrothed (engaged) but not yet formally married, yet old enough to have and nurse the Messiah, she would have been 12-14. The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible points out, "It appears that both boys and girls were married very young. Later [after the New Testament period] the rabbis fixed the minimum age for marriage at twelve for girls and thirteen for boys." ... Marrying young was the custom in many ancient cultures'. <http://www.truthortradition.com/articles/mary-a-teenage-bride-and-mother>

⁷ Her mid to late forties – adding 12-14 to 33 years.

⁸ Luke was a medical doctor, and he knew perfectly well how babies are made. It would have been just as hard for him to believe in a virgin birth as it is for us, and yet he reports it as fact.

⁹ Luke 2. 22-38. Being poor, they offered 'a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons', Luke 2. 24, in accordance with Leviticus 12. 1-8.

¹⁰ Luke 2. 41-50.

¹¹ Luke 2. 51.

¹² John 2. 1-11.

¹³ Matt. 12. 46-50; Mark 3. 31-35.

¹⁴ John 19. 25.

¹⁵ Acts 1. 12-14 with Luke 24. 49. Mary is the only one to be mentioned by name other than the eleven apostles, who abode in the upper room, when they returned from mount Olives.

¹⁶ Indeed, because the babe to whom she gave birth was no one less than God's one and only Son – that because her firstborn son was God's only-begotten Son – I suppose we could add that she was the only mother in the history of the world who could never make an idol out of her child.

¹⁷ And if any should wonder why it was that the Saviour chose John rather than His (the Lord's) own brothers for this privilege, let them remember that John was close to hand – which our Lord's brothers were not – and that, as John himself had noted earlier in his gospel, they (our Lord's brothers) did not yet believe in Him. Nor should we forget that John himself was a blood relation to Mary, in all probability, her nephew.

¹⁸ John 19. 26-27.

¹⁹ Luke 2. 35.

²⁰ Compare the same Greek expression in John 1. 10 and John 16. 32. And so, I suppose you could say, that, if when he first knew the Lord, at our Lord's word ('Follow me'), John had left a father for Him (for we read that John and his brother James 'immediately left the boat and their father and followed Him') now in the closing hours of our Lord's life on earth, and again at our Lord's word ('Behold, your mother'), John gained a mother from Him.

'A crucified man has the right to make testamentary dispositions, even from the cross. Jesus now makes use of this right, and with the official formula of the old Jewish family law he places his mother under the protection of the apostle John: "Woman, behold your son! Son, behold your mother!"', E. Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (SCM), page 113.

²¹ Acts 1. 3.

²² Acts 1. 12-14.

²³ The relationship between Mary and Jesus had never been an altogether normal mother-son relationship. It couldn't have been. And since His baptism the distance between them had become even greater.