

Luke 1:46b-55

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on
all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of
their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his
descendants forever."

Our hymn this morning, our alternative to the psalm we usually say together on Sundays, is dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is the announcement by the messenger from God, that Mary will give birth to Jesus.

I want to explore why Mary has been so persistently important through the twenty one centuries that we have been around as a people of God. I am interested not just in why we identify with her, but also in why she persists through the ages. To begin to get an answer to this question, I would like to go down a kind of litany of her role as we find it in Scripture.

The first thing we get from Scripture, is that Mary is the first disciple and she remains faithful. The Gospels make this point by telling us that when the angel comes and asks Mary to become the mother of Jesus, she says "yes" and she remains faithful to that "yes" even in the most difficult of times.

So the gospels say this about Mary: she was the first believer in Jesus; she was the first follower; the first disciple; and she did not fall away from him in troubled times. And if for no other reason, she thus earned a mark of respect in the early church community.

Secondly, in the gospel, Mary is revealed as someone who keeps God's word. I do not know if you remember that incident when Mary and her relatives were trying to see Jesus, who was in the full bloom of his public ministry, and there was a big mob around him. So they sent word through the mob, and they said, "Jesus, your mother and your relatives are here." And Jesus made this response. He said, "But who is my mother, my father, my brother and sister? The one who keeps the will of God. That is my mother, and my brother, and my sister." And in effect, what he was saying was that Mary's claim to greatness was not that she was his biological

mother, but that she kept the will of God. And that is a remarkable compliment to this persistent woman.

Thirdly, here is where she gets closer to us. She becomes a representative of all the silenced witnesses and members of the exploited class. Remember, Mary lived in occupied territory, occupied by the Roman Army. She knew what today's peoples who live in countries which are occupied by another army know today. She knew segregation. She knew a minority place; she knew what it was to be a woman. She had to stand on the fringe of the crowd while she saw her son publicly humiliated, carrying the cross. She had to stand behind the soldier's spears that formed a fence, and she could not get to Jesus on the cross to give him some comfort.

And that is why people have always related Mary in the great Pieta, holding the broken body of her son; people can identify with her letting forth the only thing she was permitted to let forth – a cry and a scream, and hard tears. Those who are oppressed and cannot speak out because they will be imprisoned or shot, or retribution will be made against their families, they understand Mary. And she understands them.

Any parent who is worried about pornography; and parents who are worried about people coming up to their children and pushing drugs, and parents who are looking at the values of the media, which are horrendous, and who say, "We do not want to live like that," but are powerless and helpless to control these things. You know what Mary means, and why she persists – because we can identify with that woman who is the silenced witness to things that are better; and society keeps her suppressed.

Fourthly, Mary is a faith pilgrim. And people can certainly identify with that. Remember the story in Matthew's gospel? "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." " And what did she say? She asked the question, "How can this be?" and, how many people throughout the ages, including you and me, have cried that? How can I tackle this challenge? How can I survive? How can I begin all over again as a widow? A widower?

We tend to romanticize the fact that Mary was married to Joseph and she lost him somewhere along the way. But there is no romance in losing a spouse, as those of you who are widows and widowers know. Or losing a child in crucifixion. Knowing death and separation. Being a bereaved person.

And you ask Mary's question, "How can this be?" you ask: "How can I carry on? How can I survive life? How can I get along? I do not know what I am going to do. I have just been told I have cancer. I have just been told I have a short time to live.

I have just lost my job, my children. How can this be?" you are asking Mary's question, "How can this be?" No wonder Mary persists. We identify with her questioning.

Next, Mary is the God-bearer, and of course, that is our role. She gave Jesus forth to the world, and I think people through the ages have always identified with that role. They say, "This is my role." Everyone here is to be a Jesus-bearer, to birth the Lord and give him to other people. Mary did that, and so we recognize that. We have a kindred spirit there.

And finally, I think Mary persists because she has been given to us. Remember the scene on Calvary? Jesus is dying. There is his mother. "Who will take care of my mother when I am gone?" so he turns to John, who represents all the Christian family, and says, "Son, behold your mother." And he gives away his last, and his most precious possession. And we are the recipients of that. And that is why the gospel has Mary stand up in the temple and sing her Magnificat and her great prophecy: "Behold, all generations shall call me blessed."

Mary lies underneath all of this. Simply because she is enormously human, because she is enormously a great disciple, and because everything in her life has touched our lives. The great psychoanalyst, Carl Jung said that Mary symbolizes mother earth, the very womb of our birth.

There is not a tear or a smile of Mary's that we have not felt. There is not a question and a hurt and a pain and a suffering that we cannot identify with. No wonder she persists.

A question I leave with you is this: can I, can we pilgrims, like Mary, give forth to the world, today, the living Jesus? And if your answer is yes, how am I, how are we demonstrating this to our family and neighbours?

-Gary Hamblin