

Mary, Mother of the Lord; CCSY, 16 August 2009

Isa 6:10-11; Gal 4:4-7; Lk 1:46-55

With apologies to Cameron Diaz, there's something about Mary! No other figure in the panoply of Christian saints seems capable of evoking such devotion, or is the focus of such misunderstanding – even suspicion – between believers. Fortunately, in our own tradition, the 2004 statement of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), 'Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ',¹ has gone a long way towards mitigating the latter.

This text highlights Mary's 'yes' as an echo of God's gracious, if stubborn, 'yes' to humanity in Christ. Mary's 'yes' is the epitome of every 'Amen', and – as such – it is not hers alone, but is a paradigm of the response which God's grace both calls for and enables from God's people, *from* Abraham and his descendants for ever. It is not a response made without serious questioning – Mary's 'how can this be?' – and for all the joy of this her longest piece of direct speech, in what we know and will hear tonight as the Magnificat, it issues also in profound sorrow.

Today's gospel follows the Annunciation and Mary's visit to Elizabeth, a narrative sweep that recapitulates similar scenes in the Old Testament: the births of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel for example are all preceded by heavenly messengers; and Luke's use of the word usually translated as 'overshadow' in the mouth of Gabriel recalls the cherubims' overshadowing of the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus (25:20) – an overshadowing repeated at the end of that book when the *shekinah* – the cloud of God's presence – covers the Ark of the Covenant 'and the glory of God filled the tabernacle' (Exod 40:34). By these resonances, is Luke presenting Mary as the living ark of the new covenant in Christ?

It would appear so, as the parallels between the early chapters of his gospel and the journey of the ark in the books of Samuel mount up: Mary goes up to a city of Judah to be hailed by Elizabeth, much as King David, who delivered the ark to Jerusalem, first goes up to a city of Judah to be anointed king; Elizabeth's question, 'why has this happened . . . that the mother of my Lord comes to me?', (Lk 1:43) echoes that of David, 'how shall the ark of the Lord come to me?' (2 Sam 6:9); Mary stays three months with Elizabeth, just as the ark 'continued in the house of Obed-edom . . . for three months before being brought to Jerusalem' (2 Sam 6:11).

And Mary's magnification of the Lord, as with the opening words of our first reading, is strongly reminiscent of Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1-10) in response to the promise of an unexpected child:

My heart exults in the Lord [Hannah begins]; my strength is exalted in my God...The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil . . . [The Lord] raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap.

If all this makes Luke's work sound derivative, that ought not surprise or disappoint us. As those of you who may be enjoying David Malouf's retelling of Homer's Iliad in his latest novel, Ransom, would appreciate, these great stories and motifs form something of a cultural stockpile – a canon, or tradition, we might call it – which subsequent generations continue to draw upon and reshape, including our gospel writers and, of course, Jesus himself.

In fact it helps to make the point of which ARCIC would remind us – that Mary's 'yes' to her precious, costly vocation, is the 'yes', the 'Amen', of God's people to seemingly impossible callings throughout the ages – in Mary's case a double impossibility: that of her own motherhood;

¹ See *Growth in Agreement III: International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statement, 1998-2005*, ed. Jeffrey Gros, Thomas F. Best, Lorelei Fuchs; Faith and Order Paper No. 204 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 82-112.

and that of the One she is called to be mother *to* – the very Word of God made flesh – what Karl Barth describes as ‘the possibility which bears all the marks of impossibility . . . [by whose] death [is declared] the impossible possibility of our redemption’.²

Human experience suggests that, like Hannah’s before her, Mary’s ebullient vision of the divine mercy to be re-membered, pieced together again in this child – of a community in which both the presumption of the powerful and the resignation of the downtrodden are overturned – is just such an impossible possibility.

The late Jacques Derrida, pin-up philosopher of postmodernity, argued ‘there is no responsibility that is not the experience . . . of the impossible’.³ We might apply this dictum to the vocation of a scientist, who, in coming to a new theorem, or inventing new technology, must allow the impossible – the unthinkable – to impinge on the possible and the thinkable.

Copernicus had to consider the absolutely unthinkable possibility that the earth revolves around the sun. How ridiculous! Any fool can see that it rises there, whizzes round, and sets over there! And yet this impossibility served as the very condition of possibility for his revolutionary cosmology. Politics is often described as the ‘art of the possible’; would that those who responds to the call to represent others were challenged to the responsibility that makes room for the impossible in determining what determines the possible. If history had been governed by the art of the possible, how impoverished every field of human endeavour would be. So too God’s mission to the world, for Mary’s responsibility lies in her response to a double impossible vocation: ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to your word.’

If Mary’s ‘yes’ is the ‘Amen’ of all god’s people writ large and small, then it must be our ‘yes’ also: our ‘Amen’ to God’s ‘yes’ to us in Christ as his body the Church, a living ark, if you will, of God’s gracious covenant with all. And, as with Mary, for all the joy inherent in this response, it will feel at times an overwhelming responsibility, an impossible calling, a costly and sorrowful burden. For, as the ARCIC statement concludes with reference to this gospel text and canticle, ‘only when joy is joined to justice . . . do we rightly share in the economy of hope and grace which Mary proclaims and embodies.’⁴

But as Mary’s ‘yes’ was never hers alone, so our response to such a vocation – including all of the serious questioning that must go with it – is never ours alone. This is modelled for us at Christ Church by people like Thom, who is testing his vocation to ordained ministry with us, and his bishop, and at College; and Emily, who has just begun that process with peers and Examining Chaplains in the Year of Discernment; and Jamie, who today, after a period of collective deliberation which included our Vestry, takes up the Archbishop’s license to serve as an Authorised lay Minister here.

After the angel left her, Mary went straight to Elizabeth for whom motherhood was equally impossible, and was six months pregnant and sang her subversive song of God’s counter-intuitive redemption with her kin. And so must we, with our fellow-adoptees in baptism, around this family table, learn – again and again – to say ‘Amen’ to God’s ‘yes’ to us; daring to imagine a kingdom, and to build a household, in which the hungry are filled with good things, and divine mercy communicated from generation to generation, after the pattern of God’s gracious promise *to* Abraham, and his descendants forever.

Richard Treloar

² *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933/1968 paperback).

³ *The other heading* (Indiana University Press, 1992), 44-45.

⁴ ‘Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ’, 106.