

Mary the Virgin Warrior (15 August 2021)

Readings: Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55

I've spent quite a large part of my life studying literature. As well as lots of reading, that involves learning some rather technical terms. Some fairly familiar ones, like 'simile' and 'metaphor'. Others stranger sounding, like 'anacolouthon' and 'peripeteia'. But I think my favourite such term is 'oxymoron'.

'Oxymoron' doesn't refer to a particularly stupid breed of cattle. No, an oxymoron is when two words or two terms are put together, yet with meanings that seem to cancel each other out, so that the entire phrase sounds absurd. Familiar if facetious examples of oxymoron are phrases like 'American culture', or 'military intelligence', or 'Anglican rioting'. There are more serious, profound, even truthful oxymorons – like Shakespeare's 'Parting is such sweet sorrow', or the Welsh poet Henry Vaughan's 'There is in God (some say) / A deep but dazzling darkness'.

And how about this one: '*a virgin warrior*'? Virgin innocence and military prowess might sound incompatible. But then there was Joan of Arc, the famous French teenager who became a freedom fighter in the name of God.

And another teenage girl – the most famous virgin of all. Mary never took up arms. Yet in this glorious song we've just heard she celebrates *revolution*. The virgin, *and* the warrior ...

First, the virgin. Perhaps today people are more likely to celebrate *losing* virginity than saving it. But many early Christians certainly valued, perhaps over-valued, virginity. And some cultures have gone to extraordinary lengths to preserve their or their daughters' virginity.

The significance of Mary's virginity is more *symbolic*. A sign, first, that her son is not so much son of Joseph as Son of God. And a sign too of innocence, of humility, of openness to her extraordinary vocation – what today's collect calls 'the *lowliness* of the Blessed Virgin Mary'.

So artists depict Mary before the angel as the pious, demure, lowly virgin. That is for the feast of Lady Day, in March. But for today's feast in August she's depicted rather in glorious robes, exalted on the clouds as 'Queen of Heaven', clothed with the sun, the moon at her feet. Some of the images and legends of her 'assumption' might seem fanciful. But isn't Mary's exaltation already there in her song?

He has looked with favour 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 ...'

In other words, Mary's *glory* springs precisely from her *lowliness*. Symbolically, if not necessarily literally, the exalted Mother remains ever virgin.

But this lowly virgin continues her joyful song as a *warrior* – or at any rate magnifying the warrior God:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

For *lowliness* does not mean deference to power and wealth or obedience to the State. The religion of the virgin Mother and her Son is not State Religion – like, say, the temples of ancient Egypt, or nearer home the Book of Common Prayer, religions imposed by the State, instilling homage to the monarch and repeated confession of disobedience to divine and human Rulers.

Not State Religion but *evangelical* religion; that is, a celebration of *good news*, the news that we are not slaves to an imperial god but *free men and women*, liberated by the Mighty One who exalts the lowly and overthrows the proud. The *faith* of Mary and of her son isn't mute submission to the powers that be or acceptance of our fate. No, faith is the wild delight that things *do not* have to be as they are; that we are not destined to live in a world where billionaires jet into space while forests burn and children starve to death.

If we are followers of Jesus, his brothers and sisters, we are therefore children of Mary, and with her children of God – children and friends, not slaves, as St Paul insisted again and again. For, as we just heard, he says, 'God sent his Son, born of a woman ... so that we might receive adoption as children. ... So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then an heir ...'

So, as we feast at her Son's table, let us exult with our Mother Mary the virgin warrior: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. ... Holy is his Name.' Amen.

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