

**Bridge Chapel, Cathedral  
Nativity of the BVM  
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Listen to a prayer from the Liturgy of S Basil, addressed to Our Lady.

*Because of you, O full of grace, all creation rejoices, the ranks of angels and the human race; hallowed temple and spiritual paradise, pride of virgins; From you God was incarnate and he, who is our God before the ages, became a little child. For he made your womb a throne and caused it to become wider than the heavens. Because of you, O full of grace, all creation rejoices; glory to you.*

It is not easy to preach on the Nativity of Our Lady because we know nothing about it. There is more about Mary in the Holy Qu'ran than in the Holy Bible, and our only reliable information is that she was an unmarried teenager when she was pregnant. We have more unreliable information about her, largely from the Protogospel of James, what Rowan Williams calls 'hilariously awful' stories that even Catholic theologians say are without any basis of fact whatsoever:

- that Anna, Joachim were her parents
- that she was a Virgin of the Temple
- that she was fed honey by Angels
- that she was sat at her spinning wheel when Gabriel appeared, the image of Stanford in G

But what I can say today is something about what Mary means to Christians, and about what she enabled – and indeed enables.

Our faith holds that Our Lady is the means by which God the logos, incarnate word, incarnate wisdom becomes human. She was God-bearer, Θεοτοκος. Some say Mary must have been special to have been chosen to act thus as God-bearer. Some say she was conceived without sin in order to have been chosen. Perhaps she was.

But for me, the whole point of the incarnation is that God chooses no-one special – God chooses one of us – God chooses you and me – in whom to implant the spark of divinity. This is what makes Christianity special – he came down to earth from heaven. If he reserves a special vessel for himself, does he not then become further removed from you and me, less accessible to you and me? That is not what the incarnation is all about.

By simple logic, if Mary is one of us, and Mary is God bearer, this could mean that we too are God bearers. And I prove this with reproductive biology.

- When an embryo is growing in the uterus, some of its cells invade maternal tissue. Some of these destroy maternal tissue and allow the embryo to exchange things with the mother.
- Some of these embryonic cells also find their way into mother's blood vessels and are carried throughout the mother's body.
- The invading embryonic cells are very unusual, in that they lose their individual boundaries and become a community without boundaries – individuals give way to a cooperative.
- Embryonic cells remain within the mother up to and after she gives birth, so the woman is changed by the embryo growing in her uterus. After giving birth, the woman is no longer the same: embryonic cells have been incorporated into her.
- The mother's immune system recognizes some same-ness in the embryo and so does not reject the embryo (like a heart transplant might be rejected).

All this is biological fact. Now put this in theological terms. During pregnancy, Jesus' cells invade Mary. Mary does not reject Jesus. Jesus and Mary exchange material. Some of Jesus' cells are left behind in Mary after Jesus has been born, and by this means Mary has been changed, transformed by the 9-month Christ-pregnancy.

But Mary is the representative of humanity, of you and me. So by spiritual extension, the Christ-event that began with Mary's pregnancy and transforms her, also transforms you and me.

**Jesus' divine cells invade Mary. Jesus invades us** – the divine spark within, like a divine radioactive core, ready to saturate all our cells, all our being, if only we will let it. As embryonic cells devour maternal tissue to enable exchange, so the divine core within can, if we allow it, devour our less salubrious parts, to enable exchange with God. Bishop Lancelot Andrewes in 1614 wrote: 'He was not idle all the time He was an embryo — all the nine months He was in the womb; but then and there He even eat out the core of corruption that cleft to our nature and us .... [We] were by this means made

beloved in Him ... this the good by Christ an embryo.' This is astonishing for 1614, without knowledge of reproductive biology.

**Exchange.** The embryonic Christ and Mary exchange things through Jesus' placenta. So we exchange with God: God sustains us, and we offer the sacrificial gifts of worship and compassion. This is the intermingling we heard of in the epistle – *all things intermingle for good for those that love God* – intermingling of divine and human.

I call this *the doctrine of mystical intermingling*, and I have patented it. My diocesan and my metropolitan have read my thesis and put up no objection, so it must be right.

### **So how do we allow the divine core to transform us?**

- Mary listened. We need to listen to God. We do this by listening to God within, the still small voice. This is the implanted word of which James wrote in last week's epistle.
- Mary did not resist. We must stop resisting the God within. Honest self-examination is a key to this.
- Thus we let the divine core within expand to fill our skins and suffuse all our tissues and thoughts. This is salvation, redemption, deification, theosis.

God became man so that man might become God, said St Irenaeus – orthodox theology known well enough by Cranmer, as we say in the Prayer of Humble Access.

We are inclined to resist the God within. We are inclined through sin to prevent its shining out. We glow with light within, but the pride and hurts that are erected around that light obscure its rays, preventing it from shining out, and preventing its being seen by others.

Self-examination and prayer that can melt away these layers, allowing the divine spark within to fill our skins, and our wills to be aligned with God's. This will start to correct the sin of Adam. Adam and Eve were created as icons of God, but by eating of the tree of knowledge, chose to want to be what they were not. They chose not to be servants of the divine within. As do we all, repeatedly, time and again.

If you're concerned that self-examination might be seen as self-indulgence, do not worry. Self-examination helps us to see the extent to which we impede the light within. It is painful when the light of Christ shines in our souls and we see our sins starkly illuminated. But as Isaac the Syrian said, it is a spiritual gift from God for a man to perceive his sins. Only then can we repent. The second great commandment tells us to love our neighbours as ourselves, not better than ourselves, and we can't do that unless we know and love ourselves. It is through thorough self-knowledge that we find in our innermost being our great healing powers as gifts to be shared with others.

### **Co-redemptors?**

Mary is suffused with divine cells, she is divinized. She is a co-redemptrix. But remember, Mary is one of us, so we all share in this redemptive power if we choose to: we can all light the way for others. At our baptisms, each one of us becomes a Christ who can participate in the energies of the Christ that is within us, though not the essence.

*Mary, Mary, quite contrary?* – well perhaps, certainly contrary in that she was self-effacingly counter-cultural. But *Mary, Mary, Extraordinary* – she was most certainly extraordinary. She was a model for you and me: she heard, she accepted, she cooperated, she enabled. She was an agent of change, through whom, in the words of Mother Julian of Norwich, the Saviour 'began his work very humbly and very gently in the Virgin's womb.' In the words of **St John of Damascus**, *The name Θεοτοκος contains the whole history of the Divine economy in the world.*

As the light within suffuses all our tissues, so we have the new creation happening in and around our cells.

Never more thy temples leave  
Finish then thy new creation  
when we shall be  
Changed from glory into Glory  
Till in heaven we take our place

As the ego of Christ is the servant of the divine within, so can we be icons of Christ as we try and align our wills with God's, and let our lights shine out to illuminate the way for others.

Sisters and brothers, Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good work, and glorify your father which is in heaven.