

Today, 8 September, is the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Catholics think that Protestants don't believe in Mary. This is nonsense. In the C of I calendar there are three festivals for Mary: the visit by Gabriel at the Annunciation, Mary's visit to Elizabeth when both of them were expecting, and today: the Nativity of the BVM. No other saint has three festivals like this. Yes, we most certainly believe in Mary. Whether or not we intercede through her is a matter of personal decision: some do, some don't. Interestingly, the disciples did – at the wedding a Cana of Galilee when Our Lord turned water in to wine.

Mary has several titles: Catholics and Anglicans call her the Blessed Virgin Mary. Catholics and some Anglicans use 'Our Lady'. The ecumenically agreed title for all the Christian churches is 'Mother of God'. A title that comes from Revelation is Queen of Heaven. There are others.

Listen to this prayer from the Liturgy of St Basil, addressed to Mary.

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 Mary's Nativity because we know nothing about it. There is more about Mary in the Koran than in the Holy Bible, and our only reliable information is that she was an unmarried teenager when she was pregnant. We have unreliable information about her, largely from the Protogospel of James, but even Catholic theologians say these are without any basis of fact:

- that Anna and Joachim were her parents
- that she was a Virgin of the Jewish Temple
- that she was fed honey by Angels
- that she was sat at her spinning wheel when Gabriel appeared.

Nevertheless, what I can say today is something about what Mary means to Christians, and about what she enabled – and indeed continues to enable.

Our faith holds that Mary is the means by which God shares our humanity: she allows the Lord to grow within her. She is God-bearer. Some say Mary must have been special to have been chosen to be God-bearer. Some say she was conceived without sin in order to have been chosen. And 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 this is absolutely true in Christian doctrine. O little town of Bethlehem, verse 4: be born in us today. Mary is the representative of humanity, of you and me. The event that began with Mary's pregnancy and transforms her, also transforms you and me.

Jesus growing in the womb transforms Mary. Jesus transforms us – the divine spark within, ready to grow and fill us - if only we will let it. This is the intermingling we hear of in Paul's epistle to the Romans – *all things intermingle for good for those that love God* – intermingling of divine and human.

So how do we allow the divine light within 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 his 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 light within expand to fill our skins and suffuse all our tissues and thoughts.

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 do not presume, etc.

We are inclined through pride to resist the God within. 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 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 hide their true selves. They chose not to be servants of the divine within. As do we all, repeatedly, time and again.

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.

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 Julian of Norwich, the Saviour 'began his work very humbly and very gently in the Virgin's womb.'

As the light within fills us we will be changed. We have the new creation happening in us. From Wesley's *Love divine*:

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

Heed to the example of Mary. Let Jesus grow in you. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good work, and glorify your father which is in heaven.