

REVOLUTION OF THE SAINTS

Luke 1:46-55

It was in the eleventh century that the Church began to develop and promote devotion to Mary, so-called Marian devotion. Some in the Church saw in her the perfect example of chastity, with the consequence that they declared her perpetually virgin. This underpinned the new ideal of universal clerical celibacy, the notion that all priests must be celibate if they are to be priests. At the same time, Mary was viewed as evidence of God's power to sanctify the flesh, since it was through her flesh that the Word of God came into the world in the person of Jesus. To reconcile these two ideas, Mary's perfect chastity and her motherhood of Jesus, the idea was advanced that Mary was herself conceived without the sin of sexual desire on the part of her parents, which the Church would call the "Immaculate Conception". According to this teaching Mary's body did not decompose after she died, in keeping with the fact that there was no record of her burial or a tomb or bodily relics as with other saints. In the 1150's a German nun claimed to have visions of Mary being taken to heaven in bodily flesh, which led to the doctrine of the bodily Assumption of Mary. All of this thinking about Mary was fueled by a popular hunger for some image of feminine holiness in the Christian faith. Churches in Europe, especially churches that did not have any relics of the bodies of saints, became fixated on images of Mary's missing body and commissioned statues of Our Lady which with luck might become a site of miraculous power and a draw for religious pilgrimages. In the 13th century Mary would become the object of a special devotion fitting only for

the highest of God's creatures. So there you have a thumbnail sketch of the early history of Marian devotion.

If you're as Protestant as I am, all of this will strike you as, well, dopey and contrived, something cooked up by the Church and upheld by dogmatic pronouncements that had the effect of discouraging anyone from actually thinking about such matters. But we're Lutherans, and we're going to think about these matters, and we're going to start by saying, "Poor Mary!" Poor whoever-she-was-Mary who was the mother of Jesus, in all probability a young girl who found herself pregnant with a pregnancy no more mysterious than any other. We can speculate to our hearts' content about how Mary was impregnated and by whom, but her story may be little more than the old story of a vulnerable young girl, fertile as can be, who without benefit of birth control bears the consequences of having sex, perhaps bears it alone, perhaps bears it with the help of parents, or maybe with someone who is a responsible male or just an interested male. All of which is to say, who knows what Joseph's relationship to Mary was?

There are several scenes in the New Testament in which Mary is a prominent figure, including the one that is our Gospel this morning, in which we read a speech that is known in the history of the Church as the Magnificat, named after the opening words in which Mary says her soul "magnifies" or declares the greatness of God. There is no reason to believe that Mary actually made this speech, which is closely modeled on the Song of Hannah in the First Book of Samuel (2:1-10). Hannah's song is praise to God who has enabled her who had been childless to conceive. In the Magnificat, we have a Jewish hymn that has been fitted to Mary's situation by St. Luke. This hymn was seen as describing the kind of salvation that was to come through Jesus, a complete turning of the

tables such that power that is not exercised in the cause of compassion is empty. This hymn is literally a call to revolution, a challenge to the powerful on behalf of the powerless, representing this challenge as the very will of God for the world and a condemnation of every form of complacency and self-satisfaction. This hymn is more than a cry for simple justice.

Justice is commonly thought of as the consequence of people pressing claims against one another according to certain rules or standards of law. We might say that justice means treating equals equally and unequals according to their inequalities. Or justice might be thought of as the distribution of goods according to the needs of each person in the belief that one is entitled to have these needs met simply by virtue of being a person. It is this notion of justice that comes closest to expressing the faith that is found in Mary's hymn. But there is more to Mary's hymn than the desire for a just distribution of goods. The subject of the hymn is that truth is based in humility and that equity is the fruit of life lived according to this truth. The hymn is not simply about achieving a just outcome, but rather it sings of a spirit according to which no one thinks of herself/himself as deserving more than anyone else. This humility is the expression of the truth about us. Indeed, according to the hymn, it is God's truth and God's will. Mary is an example of the spirit of humility, one whose lowliness has made her great in the sense that she lives a life that is befitting a true child of God. And, of course, the same will be true of her son. To say that Mary is the "Queen of Heaven" or that Jesus is "Christ the King" is merely a way of recognizing the spirit represented in their lives as the Holy Spirit and as the way we ought to be with one another and how we ought to live.

I have not seen the TV show about the Jersey shore that features several young people being themselves, which apparently means being extraordinarily vapid and not a little vicious. From what I have read, it is a kind of freak show, as is so much “reality TV”, displaying bad behavior that is rooted in the narcissism of its characters. By narcissism I mean preoccupation with oneself and especially with the notice of oneself by others and the feeling that all eyes are or should be on me. We Jerseyans are supposed to take some comfort in the fact that the players in this show are actually from New York and not New Jersey, where apparently we have better breeding. Well, perhaps, but be that as it may, it can’t be denied that the Jersey shore is an apt enough setting for this sort of show. I say this as a great lover of the shore and the beach. But this notwithstanding, the Jersey shore is a place where people come to see and be seen. It is not Beverly Hills or Palm Beach, but it is a place of tremendous affluence where wealth and luxury are shamelessly on display by people who would seem to fit Mary’s description of the proud who are scattered in the thoughts of their hearts. According to Mary’s hymn, no one should be envious of such people. On the contrary, they are to be pitied for the very things in which they evidently take so much pride. If anyone is to be envied—though that is surely the wrong word—it is those whose lives express the humility that in Mary’s hymn is called lowliness.

It is not, it should be said, impossible for the rich and powerful to be lowly. But it is not likely that they will be so. By the same token, it is not unknown or even uncommon that those who are poor are filled with envy for what the rich possess, wanting for themselves the bling they do not have. This is certainly not lowliness either. By Christian lights it’s all fine to have a revolution and distribute wealth more equitably,

especially if this can be done without bloodshed. But even so wondrous an event would not fulfill the truth expressed in Mary's hymn, which is this: that the greatness of God is to be found in the lowliness of humility. This has been the teaching of the great religious figures of all ages—Jesus, the Buddha, Prophet Isaiah, Krishna, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rumi—all of these have taught that true greatness is to be found in that humility that wants nothing for oneself that is not available to all. So, yes, of course society should be re-made to alleviate injustice. The path of true religion toward this end is the practice of humility in all of our comings and goings in the world. Amen.

Mary, Mother of Our Lord, August 15, 2010

Emanuel Lutheran Church