

*A sermon given on Sunday, December 12, 2010
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

***Mother Mary, Part Three
The Queen of Heaven & the Mother of Sorrows: Joy***

The familiar hymn “Jerusalem, my happy home” [Hymn 620], with its 16th century lyrics, envisions the day when we shall find ourselves in heaven:

Jerusalem, my happy home, when shall I come to thee?

When shall my sorrows have an end? Thy joys when shall I see?

The verses continue to imagine all the saints rejoicing there, with King David as harpist and master of the choir. And then there is the Mother of Our Lord:

*Our Lady sings Magnificat with tune surpassing sweet,
and blessed martyrs' harmony doth ring in every street.*

This is not a unique portrait of Mary as featured soloist or even leader of the heavenly choir. Consider another favorite hymn, “Ye watchers and ye holy ones.” [Hymn 618] The hymn commences by describing all the heavenly hosts praising God.

*Cry out, dominions, pryncedoms, powers,
virtues, archangels, angels' choirs, Alleluia!*

And then there is verse two:

*O higher than the cherubim,
more glorious than the seraphim,
lead their praises, Alleluia!
Thou bearer of the eternal Word,
most gracious magnify the Lord, Alleluia!*

To whom is this verse addressed? Who is the “bearer of the eternal Word”? Who is addressed by the angel Gabriel as “most gracious” (full of grace), and who is it who then “magnifies the Lord”? Why, it is Mary, of course! Mary, the God-bearer, the Mother of God. I have alluded in my introductory remarks on the past two Sundays to our Protestant heritage of reluctance to engage in much veneration of Mary. Yet how often have you sung with gusto this very hymn – with this verse proclaiming Mary “higher than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim” and addressing her as “most gracious.” Maybe we never heard about Mary from the pulpit, but we certainly sang to her loudly from the pews!

Here, then, in this beloved hymn, we sing of Mary as leader of the heavenly choir. (“*Lead their praises, Alleluia!*”) In the Hebrew scriptures it was Miriam, the sister of Moses, who led the people in singing and dancing after deliverance at the Red Sea. [Exodus 15:20] It was not a huge leap of typology for Christians to imagine another Jewish maiden with the same name, Mary, leading songs in heaven, celebrating an even greater deliverance than that at the Red Sea, the deliverance from sin and death by the action of Christ.¹

Her image as leader of the heavenly choir is just one aspect of Mary’s broader identity as the Queen of Heaven. The role is assigned to her, of course, by tradition and not Scripture. But it is an image ancient and venerable. Last week we looked at the Cleveland Virgin, a tapestry icon of 5th century Egypt, in which Mary is shown enthroned in heaven. While her Son, the Christ, reigns as King of Heaven, Mary also occupies a lower throne. It is, of course, a function

of her unique role as the Mother of God – which we explored at length last week – which sets her apart from all other members of the Communion of all the Saints. St. Anselm famously argued for the existence of God by defining God as “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” He went on to define Mary’s role as “that than which, under God, nothing greater can be thought.” So this once-in-human-history greatness led Christians to hail Mary as the Queen of Heaven. As one church historian has put it:

In all times and places, when Christianity was still undivided, and especially in the British Isles, Mary was greeted as the Queen of the World, the Queen of all creatures and the Sovereign of the Universe. . . . She is a Queen because she bore a Son who, at the very moment of his conception, on account of the hypostatic union of his human nature with the Word, was also as man King and Lord of all things. So with complete justice St. John Damascene could write: ‘When she became Mother of the Creator, she freely became Queen of every creature.’ⁱⁱ

If we have become less literal-minded in our envisioning of heaven in the modern age, perhaps it is hard for us actually to be moved by the image of a harp-playing David, with choirs of angels, led by the timbrel-shaking, crown-wearing Queen, Mary. But to let a literal, non-poetic approach get in the way of our delight at the image would be a shame, and would miss the point altogether. It is all framed by the very careful distinction the church has always intended – if not always managed to maintain – the distinction between *latreia* – “adoration”, and *douleia* – “reverence.” God alone (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) God alone is worthy of *latreia* – worship and adoration; while the saints are deemed worthy of *douleia* – reverence. We revere the saints not for the place they hold in the hereafter, but for the lives they lived on earth – for the faith which they modeled for us, and by which we can be inspired. And in that, Mary is deemed the highest of all, the Queen.

The question I have been reflecting upon is, if Mary is Queen of Heaven, just what sort of queen is she? And the answer, it seems to me, is that Mary is queen in just the same sort of inverted way in which her Son is King. What I mean is this. Whenever we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, we are always quick to say that Jesus was not and is not the same sort of king as earthly rulers. He turned the notion of ‘king’ upside down, we say. He rules not by the power of force but by the power of righteousness. He rode into Jerusalem not a chariot but on a donkey. He wore not a crown of gold but a crown of thorns. Jesus was a servant-king, whose ultimate symbol is the cross upon which he died.

If Jesus, then, is a King whose authority was sealed in his sacrifice for us, should not Mary be a “queen” who is somehow likewise understood? And, indeed, she is. For right alongside “Queen of Heaven” is another title that she bears, Mater Dolorosa, the Mother of Sorrows. While Mary’s title as Queen is derived from tradition, her title as Mother of Sorrows is derived straight from the Gospels. Jesus was only days old when the prophet Simeon foretold ominously of Mary that “a sword will pierce your soul also.” [Lk 2:35] In no time she was forced to flee with her child, while the jealous Herod slaughtered the innocent children of her homeland. In the blink of an eye, thirty years passed, and Mary’s son was hounded, arrested, humiliated, beaten, and executed before her eyes. Mary suffered that anguish from which every parent prays to be spared – the death of her child. And a horrible death it was.

Scripture tells us that Mary was present for the Crucifixion, though we can scarcely imagine it. Author Elaine Koenig reflects:

At Calvary Mary heard the pounding of the nails that were being driven through her son's flesh. The foul words of contempt and derision that the crowd hurled at Jesus hurt her deeply. ... She was witness to it all because she chose to be. ... She did not flee and hide, as some of his closest friends did, not being able to suffer with him. She could bear it; she had to bear it, for that was where her faith had led her. ... Beholding all that happened to him, his sufferings became her sufferings. ... Love does not stand at a distance but participates in the beloved's pain. ... The word 'sympathy,' as we know, means 'to suffer with.' Mary, so filled with God's love, embodied sympathy. Like her son, she accepted nothing to deaden herself to the pain or to shield herself from the heat, stench, and noise of those three dread hours. She saw, heard, and felt everything.ⁱⁱⁱ

The suffering of Mary has been a powerful focus of devotion for Christians down through the ages. It has inspired countless works of art – emblematically and perhaps quintessentially Michelangelo's *Pietà*. In music, Mary as Mother of Sorrows has inspired everything from numerous settings of the medieval poem *Stabat Mater*, to the perhaps surprising words of Lennon and McCartney:

*When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, ...
And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me,
speaking words of wisdom, let it be. ...*

As Christ turned kingship upside down, so Mary turns queenship on its head. She became Queen of Heaven only after she had lived as the Mother of Sorrows. In a vision related by Saint Brigitta of Sweden, Jesus says to his mother, "you are like the precious gold that has been beaten on the iron anvil, for you have been tried with countless tribulations."^{iv} Mary, the Queen of Heaven, leads us in singing our joyous praise to God, but only after Mary, the Mother of Sorrows, shares with us in our sorrows and pain. She is "the solace of the wretched, the [Queen] who will shelter under her protecting veil all who come to her in affliction."^v

By tradition, the watchword for the Third Sunday of Advent is *joy*. "*The ransomed of the Lord shall return,*" says the prophet Isaiah in our first lesson [35:1-10], "*everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.*" And in the Gospel, Jesus sends the joyous message that "*the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*" [Mt 11:2-11] But it is precisely to those who are in a dry land that Isaiah promises God's abundant blossoming; precisely to those of a fearful heart that he says, "Be strong, do not fear!" It is to the wavering faith of John the Baptist that Jesus announces good news. And it is most especially to us when we are in sorrow or grief that Mary presents a figure of great compassion and thus invites us with her towards ultimate joy.

American Christians, perhaps especially, are apt to confuse cheerfulness with joy. Back in the Soviet period, American visitors to the USSR would often ask Russian Orthodox believers there why their religion seemed so sombre and – to the Western eye – devoid of joy. But it was not, insisted the Russians. It was precisely the joy of their faith that kept them going in the face of persecution. What we can miss in our love of exuberance is that true joy, the deepest joy, is not always peppy, syncopated, or happy-clappy. Beaten down Christians, like those in the Soviet Union and countless other places across history, might not have expressed their joy by singing, "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands!" But when they chanted the Magnificat, Mary's song, "My spirit rejoices in God, my savior," they *really meant it*.

Christian joy is rooted not in the immediacy of warm feelings, but in the rock-bottom certainty of being deeply valued and eternally loved. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, before his martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis, wrote this:

The joy of God has been through the poverty of the crib and the distress of the cross; therefore it is insuperable, irrefutable. It does not deny the distress where it is, but finds God in the midst of it, indeed precisely there; ... it looks death in the face; yet finds life in death itself.^{vi}

You and I will find joy, with smiles of delight, at a baptism or a dinner party, or singing 'Happy Birthday' to someone special. But we find another sort of joy, with a heart full of gratitude, at a funeral or a wake, or singing 'For all the saints, who from their labors rest.'

This Advent, we await the joy of Christmastide and look towards its celebration. In that, Mary the Queen of Heaven is our model and faithful companion. However, if life holds you these days in a place of sorrow or distress, remember that the Queen of Heaven was first the Mother of Sorrows. And in that, too, Mary is our model and fellow traveler.

May we pray, as we sing:

*Our Lady sings Magnificat with tune surpassing sweet,
And blessed martyrs' harmony doth ring in every street.
Jerusalem, Jerusalem, God grant that I may see
Thine endless joy, and of the same partaker ever be!*

[Hymn 620, vv. 4 & 5]

ⁱ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 197.

ⁱⁱ Albaric Stacpoole, ed., *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, Inc., 1982), p. 254.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elaine C. Koenig, *Mary's Son – Mary's Lord* (np, 1990), pp. 108-110.

^{iv} Pelikan, p. 129.

^v Nicola Slee, *The Book of Mary* (NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2007), p. 91.

^{vi} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *True Patriotism* (William Collins, 1965), p. 189.