

Mary Now - Part 4 of 6 - Journey Towards Birth

Reading: Luke 2:1-5

Victims of Bureaucracy

Having reflected on both the Annunciation and Visitation, it is time to move towards Bethlehem. In her Magnificat Mary speaks of God's kingdom overthrowing that of the rich and powerful: He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly (Luke 1:52). Now the powers of the world set their face against Mary and her unborn child, a pattern that will dominate the gospel, but not only the gospel but also our own political reality. Good and evil, love and tyranny, these are issues played out behind the cloak of anonymity and impersonality. The pattern is repeated in our own day with families evicted from their homes, the poor and unemployed at the far end of bureaucratic efficiency. And there is little evident connection between the bureaucrat doing a job and the families and unemployed.

Nobody set out to 'get' Mary and make Jesus' birth as difficult as possible. Those who enforced the census and made pregnant women travel long distances without security or provision for the birth of a child may have felt pity, but what could they do? They had a job to do, a census to be taken, State needs to be met. When the structures of bureaucracy take precedence over all else, we invert the godly order of our world; human beings are put in the service of institutions, as created to serve the idols of technology and market forces. A person too poor and impotent to work the system becomes its victim. We could well ask ourselves what are the major values of our own society, especially in an election year.

Lives in Light and Darkness

Mary's experience of God teaches us that the purpose of God is mysterious and the following of God requires a faith that does not demand worldly approval or visible signs of affirmation. We follow God in darkness, knowing that God is the meaning and end of our journey. Along the way there will be times of peace and times of struggle. Mary found favour with God, blessed among women and full of grace. The child she was carrying was God's Son. Surely, she was entitled to a quiet confinement and a gentle birth? Instead, her faith was stretched to the utmost in the situation in which she found herself. The journey to Bethlehem witnesses to the tenacity of her faith. An example to us when we find our own dreams and visions trapped in a quagmire of bureaucracy and political obstruction, or when an action we believe is right produces greater trouble than when we started.

Go to Joseph

Joseph struggled alongside Mary on the journey to Bethlehem, sharing her helplessness in the face of Roman occupation. If Mary represents the autonomy of woman before God in the event of Jesus' conception, what does Joseph represent? God asked Joseph to agree to something supremely difficult for a man shaped in a patriarchal culture: to marry a woman who was pregnant with someone else's child. Joseph loved Mary enough to bend the rules of patriarchy, even though the law demanded of him to expose her supposed adultery. God asked more of him, to break the rules altogether and to assume responsibility for Mary's child.

In a touching moment in the film *The Nativity Story* Mary looks lovingly at her weary and sleeping husband, after a perilous river crossing during the journey to Bethlehem, and says to

her unborn child: “My son, you will have a good and decent man to raise you.” Having accepted Mary and her baby and having braved the gossip surrounding her pregnancy, Joseph found himself stripped of the traditional role as provider and protector. At the end of Mary’s pregnancy, Joseph was unable to meet her basic physical needs for rest and comfortable birthing place. His masculinity symbolised nothing. He struggled alongside his wife and shared her powerlessness. Deprived of their social roles, their sense of belonging and all outward signs of status and identity, the couple on the road to Bethlehem represent the little people of this world, the people who are forever migrants and refugees because they are small cogs in the vast impersonal machines of power.

An Oppressive State

The needs of such people, like those of Mary and Joseph and their unborn child, pale into insignificance beside the demands of the State. It would have mattered nothing to the powers that be if this pregnant woman had died in childbirth as so many did in the first century. The lives of the poor are regarded as cheap. But stripped of all comfort and protection, Mary was not alone; friends and travelling companions walk with her throughout her life. God was with her in Joseph’s companionship on the road to Bethlehem. When we look for God’s presence in our lives, we must look not for signs but for people. God’s love rarely comes to us as an abstract mystical force. It is almost always incarnate, channelled only in community.

At those moments when we feel ourselves absolutely alone in the core of our existence, at the moment of birth and death or in the depths of terror and pain, we experience God as Absence, as the One who forsakes us. As long as there is some conscious part of our being that can reach out to another, as long as we are aware of another person’s concern, we sense the presence of God. *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*, ‘Where there is charity and love, God is there’. Mary and Joseph made God present to one another on the road to Bethlehem, and together they prayed for the child who was coming to birth who would make God present to all humankind.

For everybody who has undertaken difficult journeys, every married couple that have looked to one another for encouragement and support in challenging circumstances, these infancy narratives written 80 years after the events they try to describe, still have powerful symbolism and impact. They can be a source for popular reflection and meditation, for both the Mary of the dogmas and the ordinary woman of her time who went through the process of living in very trying circumstances. The gospels have very few references to her. But more important than these is her whole life with Joseph and Jesus, her relatives and the community of the followers of her Son, in a time of intense social upheaval, marked by the struggle of the poor and oppressed for freedom and justice. Most of it is not written and we have to use our imagination.

References

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Published in the *Marist Messenger*, 31 October 2014.