

Mary in Scripture - Part 3 of 8 - Birth of Jesus

Readings: Luke 2:6-19; Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11

A Real Birth

Birth, the word opens up a world of meaning; a woman in childbirth is on the threshold of life and death. Her body struggles to bring the future into being, but her pain and exhaustion consume her to the point where she experiences a dying as well as a birthing, a loss of self, of identity, of control and dignity, a loss of all the protective layers with which we surround ourselves. When a woman gives birth to her firstborn child, she is born into a new relationship. A child is born but so is the new identity of mother. When Jesus died on the cross, his physical passion was Mary's spiritual passion; in Jesus' birth, Mary underwent her own physical passion. Rejected by society and lying in a barn among animals, she suffered for the salvation of the world.

Let us be quite clear on the argument that Mary, free from original sin, would not suffer in childbirth. Jesus' birth was as real as his death. Mary gave birth as all women do, in bringing her baby into the world. Water and blood poured from her body in the birthing process, as it was to flow from her Son in giving birth to the body of the Church (John 19:34). God entered our world through a woman. To assert anything less is to walk down the road of the Docetic heresy that could not accept the brutal reality of the crucifixion, so often dwelt on in gory detail, while the birth of Jesus is portrayed in a timeless sentimental image of stable and shepherds with a Madonna free from all traces of childbirth. Such an image alienates most women who have experienced childbirth and is unfair to Mary herself.

Consequence

To suggest that the physical changes in Mary through giving birth put an end to her capacity to serve God in perfect love is to reject the natural processes of women's bodies, created and ordained by God. It is to tie an understanding of 'virginity before, during and after birth' to a purely mechanistic and physical level to the neglect of the spiritual level of her undivided heart. As we walk through the liturgical season of Advent with Mother Church, the raw power of a pregnant woman becomes a spiritual condition that we all share, male and female, awaiting a birth. While we try to prepare ourselves, to be at peace with God and the world, to move toward Christmas in quiet contemplation, we find ourselves caught up in frantic shopping, cooking and rushing about. The spirituality of Christmas is crowded out by the pressures of the world.

For Mary also the first Christmas was not what she expected. She did not spend her time quietly preparing for the birth of her child, and when he was born she found herself alone and forsaken. Perhaps she remembered that rare mystical moment when God was present, communicative and awaiting her consent. Where was God now when her pain and fear were intense? During the birth there was no bright gleam of angel's wing or encompassing light or peace beyond words. Mary shared with her sisters on earth that have given birth that risk within the space between life and death that is giving birth. In Mary's day that risk was a great one. We know from skeletal remains that the average life expectancy for a woman in the first century was between 28 - 30 years of age; for men, ten more years.

Many deaths came about in an age when infant mortality was high, perhaps as much as 50%. Multiple pregnancies carried grave risks.

Those at the Crib

For Mary, the whisper of angels came later when the shepherds arrived, praising God and telling her that the heavens rejoiced at the birth of her child. If there is truth in the line that every new birth is a sign that God has not given up on the human race, then how infinitely true this was in the birth of Jesus. Mary had to believe what the shepherds told her, treasuring their words and pondering them in her heart. Christmas comes to us as a rumour of love, whispered amidst the noise and frenzy, carried on the lips of improbable messengers. And in the midst of the chaos of so many Christmases we hear and experience God's love and care through the love and care we try to extend to others and, hopefully, that we experience from them.

Many artists have tried to capture the beauty of the shepherds at the crib; Gerrit Van Honthorst (1590-1656) shows the shepherds as rugged men crowding around the manger in delight, close to the child, their faces expressing joy, reverence, awe and excitement. A journey that began for Mary with the angel Gabriel coming to a young woman, open to God's word, now brings in strange visitors in a faraway place, who became bearers of God's reassurance to her that her child would bring peace to earth. Many people live out of earshot of angels, behind closed doors. We need to search out the poor shepherds of our world and ask them what the angels are saying. God's favour does not rest on the rich and powerful, but on the woman and her child in the stable and the shepherds in their field.

And there were Wise Men

These also heard the message, and they too have something to teach us. They set out with false expectations, hoping to find a king in a royal palace. Would they have set out if they had known what lay at the end of the journey? But something in them was open to newness, and this enabled them to recognise the ultimate significance in the child they encountered. So often the minds and hearts of the rich are closed to the poor. The wise men had the appearance of wealth, knowledge and power, but the landscape of their souls was that of the open hillside where the shepherds lived, where angels appeared and God's glory and power broke through in a new-born child.

A Christmas Card Scene?

The nativity was not quite the scene peddled in shopping malls. It was a scene of hope in the depths of poverty, pain and abandonment. Jesus was born on the periphery of society, not at its centre. There was no community to welcome him. There were only the shepherds, and later the wise men who had to leave their ordered world and travel to the margins of society to find the one they sought. The nativity is a scene repeated over and over again in our world today, but we have to pull back the curtains of our lives to see the star.

A baby born to a poor woman proclaims a truth. In times of war and famine and social crisis, birth rates tend to increase rather than decrease. It is as if the birth of a child defies death. It was the birth of a child to a poor peasant woman from Galilee that will one day defeat death altogether. We await that time as we mourn the deaths of 1800 plus

Palestinians and 60 plus Israelis, as the Ukraine tears apart the life in the land below and the skies above, all the brutal work of big people with small consciences. We wait, work for, and pray for the day when God 'will bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly' (Luke 1:52).

Source

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