

Mary Now - Part 1 of 6 - Encountering Darkness - Mary the Refugee

The Flight into Egypt: A real woman lies at the heart of all the Church celebrates about Mary. As I look back on this recent series of articles, I am struck by how human the life of Mary really was, how much she shared the experiences of so many of humanity: the process of giving birth, the terror of being driven out as a refugee and seeking sanctuary in a foreign land, the anxiety of losing her teenage Son, the pain of the loss of her loved husband, the sadness of having to let her child go as he set out on his life mission, and his tragic and premature death as a rejected criminal. Today's reflection takes us to the heart of what so many are experiencing in our world today: persecution, displacement and exile. To deny this whole area of her life prompts the question of the theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, "What have we done to Miryam of Nazareth?"

The Flight into Egypt and the Crucifixion

Two episodes in the Gospel accounts of Mary's life make us recoil from the reality of what they suggest: the Flight into Egypt and the Crucifixion. We can seek refuge in allegory and symbolism, considering every possibility but that mother and child, with Joseph, are caught up in this drama as real human beings who love and suffer and plead with God not to let this happen, to take this cup of suffering away. This is a trio blessed by God, not cursed or punished. Nor are thousands of refugees today, including those from Iraq, to whom Pope Francis spoke: "The church suffers with you and is proud of you, proud to have children like you".

The Reality of Pain

If we would learn from Mary, we must let our minds travel with her into Egypt and to the foot of the cross, and allow the raw pain of her experience to strip our prayer of sentimentality and escapism. Yet what a modern luxury it is when, instead of taking a contemplative stance in quiet reflection on Mary's journey in the real world, we reduce the refugee mother in torment, to a disquieting flicker on the television screen. Rachel's grief at the loss of her children echoes in our day. There can be no prayer whose peace is not disrupted by comfortless Rachel; no church walls thick enough or devotions pious enough, to shut out our awareness of Rachel's children being no more.

In a recent (3 September 2014) Wednesday address to pilgrims our pope gave a similar message: he told the pilgrims that the church is a mother who knows how to help her children most in need, "pick up the child who falls, heal the sick, seek the lost, wake up the sleeping, and also defend her defenceless and persecuted children."

We struggle to tell the truth of this situation because we have words that speak of the hell of the wicked and the heaven of the good, but we have no words that tell of the hell of the innocents. This is what Mary and Rachel and their children endure today in a million different ways, as the imagination of power finds ever new ways to exercise its demonic will over the powerless.

Power, Politics, and Pence: We could name the imagination of power as Herod, Hitler, Stalin, ISIS, but it also is the capitalism condemned in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the murderer and rapist, all who tear apart the fragile hopes that knit society together. It is governments who do not

care for the poorest members of that society. Community evil and the evil individuals create a sense of everybody's problem but nobody's fault. This is the evil that Mary and Joseph experienced when they were forced to flee from Herod.

Motif for Today

There are many incidents in Jesus' life that stretch the contemporary imagination almost to breaking point, but the flight into Egypt is not one of them. If there is a single Christian motif that is appropriate to our age, then surely it is the image of the terrified family fleeing before Herod's army. It is lived out in Africa, the Middle East, Iraq and Syria in our day.

And Western nations refuse hospitality to these refugees. There is no room at the inn of those nations who said, "Never again," to war, and condemn the genocide so prevalent. Rachel weeps and refuses to be comforted by pious platitudes. She knows better. We have not learned from Rachel's grief. There are so many holy families trapped face to face with Herod inside their national boundaries, while Western leaders meet in conference centres and discuss strategies for reducing immigration and protecting their own prosperity. It was once wisely said that these realities are not to make us feel guilt but to feel compassion. Guilt can be negative but compassion stirs us to action.

The flight into Egypt finds space on our Christmas cards but it does not connect with the realities of the lives of most of us. It is decorative rather than scandalous, stripped of its power to judge, and therefore stripped ultimately of its power to call us out of our selfishness into loving vulnerability. Mary and her child are refused entry at our borders because they are outsiders and immigrants. They are outsiders to our world because they represent Immanuel, God with us, but God is the Outsider, the Other, and we learn to welcome him only when we recognise him in those unlike us, the stranger, the alien, and to the extent we barricade such people out of our lives, we barricade God out too.

When Mary fled into Egypt, she experienced the darkest side of history, the very opposite to the world of her Magnificat.

Two thousand years on and we still wonder when Mary's hopes will be fulfilled, that the hungry will be filled with good things, the rich sent away empty, the proud and arrogant pulled down from their thrones, and the world will recognise and live by the promised mercy and compassion of our God. Children still die and go without food while our Herods play their power games. Yet we have to hope and nurture the Christ among us; despair is the greatest enemy of all. There is a place for holy rage that is conceived in hope and not in despair; holy rage is the birthing pain of the living commitment we need to change the world. It is the numbness of indifference that should terrify us, not the passion of hope.

A Physical and Spiritual Journey

The reality of physical hardship and persecution lies at the heart of the Flight into Egypt. Yet it is also a story of faith. When we read of Mary's struggle we read not of her defeat but of her perseverance and faithfulness. We cannot enter into her world unless we allow her spirituality to infuse her story. We cannot understand her physical journey unless we also understand it as a spiritual journey. We have seen the ecstasy of the Annunciation, joy in the presence of Elizabeth, celebration of God's love in her Magnificat prayer which gives Mary's vision of a world of justice and peace; now we have the reality of her situation, the journey

into darkness and fear, a journey to the heart of a world of injustice, the kingdom of the prince of this world.

It would be a very small God who could be trusted only when the going was good and life was easy. Mary was discovering the enormity and mystery of God's love. God chose her not because she was submissive and meek and obedient. God chose her because she was a woman of extraordinary determination and perseverance, a woman of loving resistance and struggle. Her Son would learn by her example, as we are called to.

Source

Beattie, T. (1995). *Rediscovering Mary: Insights from the Gospels*. Triumph Books: Liguori, MO.

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