

Mary Now - Part 2 of 6 - Disciple in the Ministry of Jesus

Readings Mark 3:31-35; Luke 11:27-28.

Introduction

Love for God's Kingdom: Jesus began his public ministry with the proclamation that the reign of God had broken into human history. Those who heard his message and followed him as his disciples were ordinary people called from ordinary lives to learn a new way of living. Mary had been called long before but she, too, had to learn new ways of relating to her Son in his new role as proclaimer of God's Kingdom.

It is too easy to interpret the two passages above (Jesus' True Family; True Blessedness) as failings on Mary's part in her relationship with her Son, that she is being put aside, having fulfilled her function and that she had no special status among the disciples. This is a disturbing interpretation of God's dealings with her, of a woman who voluntarily agreed to be a central participant in the Incarnation, in the most intimate way being caught up into and transformed by the mystery of the Word made flesh. Mary remained faithful to her calling through the most trying of circumstances to bring him to birth, to protect him, to provide a home where he could learn, and by her love and example be the key to the mission and life of her Son. This truth is evident in Luke where the Magnificat prayer of Mary becomes the programme of action for her Son.

Distorted Texts

What does it say about our idea of God, and of women in the eyes of God, if we believe that after all this, Jesus pushed Mary aside and refused her any special place in his life? Patriarchy gives an image of a god who uses women for their bodies and then discards them, treating them as something less than full partners in the building up of the dream of God for humanity, the Kingdom of God, and its instrument, the Church. There has to be a deeper and more loving understanding of God's dealings with Mary.

Certainly, the physical bond between Mary and Jesus has decreased; the womb that bore him and the breasts that he suckled are no longer significant. What matters was that her faith had endured, that she was able to move beside her Son in his public ministry in an altogether new role in the wider community of disciples, as their example and inspiration. Mary was to become the Mother of the infant Church, a wider role that required a mothering person, a person whose whole orientation and concern was for the common good, for the nurturing of relationships and ideas that would foster the sense of community that was such a mark of the early Church.

A Changing Relationship

When a mother-child relationship develops in a healthy and creative way, there will be a shift as the two grow away from dependence to facing the world shoulder to shoulder, and the love between the two becomes an example and inspiration to others. So it was with Mary and Jesus. That early love remained as strong as ever but was expressed differently as it became inclusive rather than exclusive, open to a world of strangers. It became a love that did not set boundaries nor impose restrictions, but strengthened and encouraged others to do what must be done for God's Kingdom.

Mark says that Jesus' relatives 'went out to seize him, for they said, "He is out of his mind"'; the text suggests his mother was with them although it is hard to believe she would have shared their doubts. In a culture based on honour-shame as predominant values, one can understand concern for the family name was dominant among relatives. But Mary had enough experience of the God of surprises to know that responding to God's call meant behaving in ways that the world might find bizarre or anti-social. We need to reinterpret Mary's presence among Jesus' concerned relatives over the family name. Her Son had taken a radically different path from what was expected of him by the family traditionalists. How often mothers find themselves in a role of mediating between such family branches and offspring who opt for different lifestyles and values.

Mary's Son would certainly have appeared unusual to his extended family; she shared the vision that inspired him and was instrumental in forming that vision. Before long rumours were circulating about his behaviour – associating with sinners, accusations of blasphemy. Mary suffered with her Son and for him. For thirty years she had loved him and learned with him and from him. Now at this new moment (the text on Jesus' True Relatives Mark 3:31-35; Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-23) a powerful contrast is set in place. In the community of equals that was the fledgling Church, nobody had preferential treatment. Mary (and by implication, the other relatives) had no special rights because of blood ties with Jesus. Her place in that community was not defined by her role as woman and mother.

In one of the few passages in the Bible, inclusive language is used: all were mothers, sisters and brothers (Mark 3:35).

At this point in the gospel gender is rendered irrelevant with regard to discipleship. Mary is not demoted in this passage. A powerful contrast is set up between insiders (disciples) and outsiders (those who do not believe and accept Jesus). The Lukan account of the event best catches the meaning – in response to the information that his mother and relatives were outside, wishing to see him, Jesus replies by asserting that his mother and relatives are those who hear the word of God and do it (Luke 8:21). This describes the earlier response of Mary at the Annunciation and the text that follows, the beautiful parable of the Sower which describes the good soil that yields a hundredfold, supremely exemplified in Mary.

Augustine's great line, that it was a greater thing for Mary to have been Jesus' disciple than his mother seems startling at first sight. But when we are urged to follow Mary, we do that as disciples of her Son, taking our place among the sisters and brothers and mothers of Christ. I remember asking a Markan scholar why 'fathers' were not in the text; it was something that even he had not noticed. I suspect it was because only God is given the term, Abba or Father. But the Church has redefined our use of the term and we have to make space for both physical and spiritual fatherhood. All groups share in the call to discipleship that is given not through gender but through faith.

A Gospel Caution

It is important to remember that the gospels reflect different times and communities. Mark's negative view may well reflect the situation of his community, where Gospel commitment required heavy sacrifice in the family realm and betrayal by family members of Christians to Roman authorities was a reality. But Mark, whose community may well have not known the

mother of Jesus, is only one element in the total picture. This is true of the developing portrait of Mary, aptly described as moving from Mark's faint outline, through Matthew's slightly stronger sketch, into the vivid painting or full-bodied sculpture of Luke and John. What is fascinating about Mary and her role in the story of our salvation is the significant development in appreciation of her by the communities that gave us the Gospels.

Source

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

Published in the *Marist Messenger*, 1 March 2015.