

Mary and the Reformation - Part 3 of 4 - Luther

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was bound to have a different approach to Mary from Zwingli as he was neither a pastor nor a chaplain, being a friar and a scholar trained in Scholastic theology. He preached on a number of feast days of Mary, her Conception, Birthday, Assumption, Purification, Annunciation and Visitation. His best work on Mary was his marvelous commentary on her Magnificat canticle, composed for the nephew of Luther's chief protector, Duke Frederick the Wise of Saxony.

Mary's Song (Luke 2:46-55)

From Mary's song one should draw 'Wholesome knowledge and a praiseworthy life.' One should hope also 'to chant and sing it eternally in heaven.' Doctrinally the song strongly refers to Christ and the salvation he accomplished. Mary 'sings most sweetly of the fear of the Lord, what manner of Lord he is, and especially what his dealings are with those of high and low degree.' Devotionally Luther does not hesitate to wish for Mary's help: 'May the tender Mother of God herself procure for me the spirit of wisdom, profitably and thoroughly to expound this song of hers.' He prays 'May Christ grant us (this) through the intercession and for the sake of his dear Mother Mary.'

The beautiful commentary on Mary's prayer was written after his excommunication and his writing still was not yet affected by his growing polemic with his critics. The basic principles he still held to begin with the insight that Mary was of the descendants of a by then impoverished Davidic line (present insights would stress the Davidic ancestry was through Joseph). Mary was 'but a simple maiden, tending the cattle and doing the housework, and doubtless esteemed no more than any poor maidservant today.' And yet Christ 'is born of the despised stem, of the poor and lowly maiden.'

Luther maintained the traditional doctrines of her virginity and her life: 'She became a mother in a supernatural manner and without violation of her virginity.'

Mary, Holy and Human

Mary's song is the poetic and grateful record of her experience as Mother of the Saviour. She sang it to the glory of God, and 'not for herself alone but for us all, that we should sing it after her.' Highly favoured by God though she is, Mary preserved her humanity and constantly confessed her low estate before God. This is one of the main points that Luther, writing to a prince, emphasised as he dwells on the notion that 'humility is the highest of virtues', something dear to Pope Francis as he puts before as the point that 'clericalism is the cancer of the Church.'

Like Luther. Pope Francis reminds us that one should not eliminate her lowliness and dwell only on 'great and lofty things' and attribute all kinds of merits to her. On the contrary, it is precisely in her lowliness that 'she is the foremost example of the grace of God.'

Mary in her *Magnificat* not only tells us of what God has done in her; she praises God's work in all humanity, 'singing also for them' and inviting us to sing with her. These divine works appear in the song as 'mercy,' 'exalting the lowly,' 'filling the hungry with good things,' 'sending the rich away empty.' These were once described as a political, social, and economic revolution. To

conclude her song, Mary sings of ‘the very greatest of all God’s work – the Incarnation of God’s Son.’ Since this was done for the salvation of the whole world, Mary ‘acknowledges herself handmaiden and servant of all the world.’ The world is symbolised here by Israel, at least by ‘that part of it that is God’s servant.’

Marian Piety

Luther was concerned that one can become so used to the *Magnificat*, sung daily and solemnly in the prayer of the church, Vespers, that one no longer properly appreciates it. He said ‘The oftener we sing it the more we silence its true music and meaning.’ ‘It needs to be pondered in the heart, what it means to be the Mother of God.’ We should bless Mary in keeping with her prophecy, ‘all generations shall bless me’; ‘such a blessing is done with all one’s strength and downright sincerity, with the heart, moved by her low estate and God’s gracious regard for her.

How well Luther anticipated our own times, the Conference of Latin American Bishops who said of Mary’s song, ‘It is an escape to interpret this at only a spiritual level’! And the situation under a Latin American dictatorship when the praying of the *Magnificat* in public was forbidden; the powerful elite were possibly more aware of the challenge of the song that were those who prayed it without imbibing its call for justice to the poor and lowly.

Marian Doctrine

Luther preserved a warm piety toward the Virgin Mary, accepting the traditional doctrines, from ‘Mother of God’ to her virginity and sinlessness. Always he related Mary to Christ and his work of salvation. She is seen as a marvelous example of the divine power of redemption. Her own act of faith at the annunciation shows that she was totally justified and sanctified by God. Yet in her song of praise she referred all glory and power to God, claiming only lowliness for herself. By this she sets the example of a truly Christian life.

In his *Order of Public Worship* (1523) Luther kept the Assumption as August 15th saying, “We believe that the Mother of Christ is with him in heaven (since all saints live in God). Yet we cannot know ‘how’ she is in heaven, and it is in any case not necessary to know it.” What ought to be celebrated is not the assumption of Mary but the ascension of Christ, by virtue of which Mary is also in heaven with her Son.

Chris and Mary

In 1530, in his Christmas sermon, Luther devoted part of it to the Virgin who gave birth on that day. There are two ways of faith in this matter; the first faith believes the fact that the Virgin called Mary gave birth to a baby named Jesus, even believing she was an immaculate virgin and Christ was more than a man. But if these words are planted no higher than in my thoughts, then they have no firm root. The second faith is the important one; it proceeds from the heart. Mary gave birth to her child for me. Luther’s constant concern was that faith be not only conceptually or doctrinally true, but also alive and fruitful, that it commits the whole believer to Christ as Christ commits himself to the believer.

The paradox of forgetting and remembering come to the fore: “I am to accept the child and his birth and forget the Mother, as far as this is possible, although her part cannot be forgotten, for

where there is a birth there must also be a mother.” The mother must be forgotten since all honour goes to her Son and to his Father in heaven:

“Mary, you did not bear this child for yourself alone. The child is not yours; you did not bring him forth for yourself, but for me... I have a greater honour than your honour as his mother. For your honour pertains to your motherhood of the body of the child, but my honour is this, that you have my treasure, so that I know none, neither men nor angels, who can help me except this child whom you, O Mary, hold in your arms...”

Central Concern

Luther’s entire theological effort was to make sure that being brought into right relationship with God (justification by faith) meant that there should be no speculation on Marian privileges and no stress on Mary’s cooperation with her Son in the task of salvation. The Virgin is entirely a receiver of God’s grace. Her lowliness is her greatness; she has no greatness of her own but only that of Christ. It follows that prayer to Mary or to any saint is not a normal Christian way. It should not try to force the hand of God. It is better to remain indirect: asking God through or with the intercession of Mary rather than asking Mary to intercede for us.

No one is saved except through the only mediator, Christ (1 Timothy 2:5), but this does not rule out that we may pray for one another and the saints and notably the Mother of God can pray for us. What Luther sees is two types of mediation, a mediation of redemption or salvation pertaining to Jesus that Scripture clearly ascribes to his sacrificial death, and a mediation of intercession by which we may pray for one another and invoke others (saints and Mary) for assistance along our journey.

Later Lutheran practice became less Marian than either Luther or the churches of the 16th century. The feasts of Mary vanished from the liturgical calendar and the warm attitude to the mother of Christ that is so manifest in Luther’s explanation of the Magnificat has become a thing of the past.

Source

Tavard, G. H. (1996). *The Thousand Faces of Mary*. Michael Glazier: Collegeville, MN.

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