

Mary in Scripture - Part 1 of 8 - Hail Mary: Blessed among Women

Introduction

As we move into a new liturgical year, the Gospel followed is that of Matthew. We will hear the opening genealogy that places Jesus as Son of Abraham and son of David. But we also hear of Mary, his mother, placed among some of the great women of Israel. It is on their stories that I would like to focus as Mary is blessed among these courageous figures.

Tamar

In Genesis 38, Tamar marries Er, a son of the patriarch, Judah, but Er soon dies, leaving her a childless widow. The rule of levirate marriage (to the brother-in-law) comes into play, allowing her to conceive a child to produce heirs for the deceased. Onan, the next brother, acts selfishly and refuses to imperil any personal inheritance rights, and avoids his responsibility. He dies as punishment. Judah, now fearful for his youngest son, Shelah, tells Tamar to return to her father's house until Shelah is older. Nothing comes of Judah's promise.

As time passes, the imperilled widow, takes the initiative. At sheep-shearing time Tamar exchanges her mourning clothes for those of a prostitute to obtain from Judah what he would not provide through his son. By this time, the patriarch has lost his own wife, and not recognising Tamar behind her veil, he hires her as a harlot. She requires of him his seal, cord, and staff as guarantees of later payment. But when a friend of Judah comes to pay her, he is told by the townspeople, "No prostitute has been here." The line is important as an indication that Tamar is an honourable woman, seeking what was rightfully hers.

Three months later, when evidence of her pregnancy is apparent, Judah wants her burnt, a punishment well beyond the customary stoning, and usually reserved for the offending daughter of a priest. Then she produces the evidence that Judah is himself the father, and in a rare admission for a patriarch, pronounces her more righteous than he.

Tamar is a woman who takes charge, but there is no evidence that she was assisted by the patriarch in caring for her twin children. Was she left to bring them up alone? Such a common situation in our own day! She uses deception as do so many of the women in these early stories, their only weapon in a patriarchal society.

Rahab

In Joshua 2 we have the story of the two Israelite spies who spend the night at the house of Rahab the prostitute. She hides them from the king of Jericho, discerning that God is on their side. In exchange, they guarantee her safety and that of her family. The location of the spies in a brothel would serve the purpose of overhearing the talk of the town and be one location where strangers would not be particularly conspicuous or suspicious. Rahab takes a huge risk in protecting them but she does so because of her faith in a future that belongs with the God of Israel. She is clever in outwitting the king, ignoring his death-affirming command, acting in a way that affirms life.

Later her action leads to her family and descendants living among the people of Israel. She became a righteous convert, married into the line of Judah, wife of Salmon and mother of Boaz, and was the legendary ancestor of eight prophets (including Jeremiah), and of Huldah the prophetess. Hers is a story of redemption, of the spies, of her family, and of herself.

Ruth

This popular story of loyalty and tragedy that turns into triumph has hidden depths. Ruth responds to Naomi with words that should remind us of another radical acceptance, Mary accepting her future. Orpah chooses her destiny by returning. She does the expected thing; Ruth does the unexpected. Her choice is startling; she chooses death over life; she sacrifices her national identity; she renounces her religious affiliation. The radicality of her choice is matched only by Abraham in his call: "leave your country and kindred and father's house for a land I will show you" (Gen 12:1). But Abraham was a man, with a wife and possessions. Ruth stands alone. No God called her or promised blessings and support. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel! The depth of her commitment finally silences Naomi.

So we have the deep friendship of a younger and older woman, a forerunner to Elizabeth and Mary. We have a subversive element in the ethnic identity of Ruth, from Moab, one of Israel's most hated enemies, being in the blood line of David. Mary also speaks the language of a God on the side of the poor and despised, and against the wealthy and powerful (Luke 1:51-53).

The Mother of Solomon

Interestingly, Bathsheba is not named in the genealogy. She is called 'the wife of Uriah' (Mat 1:6). She is honoured as the mother of Solomon, the wisest of kings. Bathsheba, victim of the king's lust, loses her husband to the murderous plan of the royal adulterer, David. She works with Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet to ensure that her son, Solomon, will sit on the throne of Israel.

Mary

What is the mother of Jesus doing in the company of these other women? First, two explanations we can set aside: Jerome said that the four were sinners and Mary's son came for sinners. The women were not seen as such in Israelite history, but were respected, praised and honoured for their contributions to the line of Judah. They were all foreigners (Luther), and Jesus came for Gentiles also. But there is no evidence that Tamar or Bathsheba were foreigners. Nor does this apply to Mary who was Jewish.

All five women give birth within the context of irregular marriages; contributing children to the line of Judah, moving from one end of Jewish history to the other. Each occurs at a critical moment in the history of God's people, Tamar at Judah's critical origins, Rahab at the moment of entry into the Promised Land, Ruth at the beginnings of kingship, and Bathsheba at its full flowering in Solomon. In difficult circumstances these foremothers each dreamed of a future and acted to bring it about.

Mary brings to fulfilment the promise inherent in the life of all these women. God works through the extraordinary and unexpected. These final two explanations seem to apply to all five women, not just four.