MARY OF THE GOSPELS: TRUE BELIEVER AND FIRST DISCIPLE

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Today we have a renewed appreciation of the historical Jesus who lived his life as a Jewish teacher and prophet in first century Palestine. This has been made possible through decades of scholarship giving us new insight into the Jesus of the Gospels. However, when it comes to uncovering the historical Mary, mother of Jesus, we are beset with difficulties. Mark and Paul, for example, show little historical interest in Mary: Paul does not even mention her by name; Mark is content to place Mary among the relatives of Jesus who are slow to understand who the real Jesus is!

Matthew and Luke are more alive to the significance of Mary in the conception of Jesus "by the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:18; Lk 1:34). However, although Matthew understands Mary's important role in God's plan of salvation, he does not show much concern for the historical person Mary. With Luke (Gospel and Book of Acts) it is a different story. Here, God's plan...
of salvation includes a special role for women disciples and a special place for the poor and voiceless. Mary figures as faithful woman disciple and the one who gives voice to the powerless.

In fact, for Luke, Mary is the first disciple to hear God's word and respond to it with full faithfulness. This is why she is so "highly favoured" and "full of grace" (1:28) – not so much because of her biological motherhood of Jesus, but through her ability to "hear the word of God and put it into practice" (11:28). This is evident in the story of Mary's visitation to Elizabeth (1:39-56): she responds "with haste" to her cousin in need; the two women "rejoice" in the marvels of God's ways; Mary becomes spokesperson for the "faithful poor" of Israel in the words of the *Magnificat* (1:46ff.).

Not that Mary is depicted as always understanding what is being asked of her. For Luke as for John, Mary is seen to grow in her faith as a believer. This is demonstrated when Mary and Joseph find the young Jesus in the temple – and "did not understand what he meant" (Lk 2:50). In John's Gospel story of the wedding at Cana (2:1-11), Mary again fails to fully understand her son's mission. For John, Mary grows into full discipleship at the Cross of Jesus where she is given the special role of 'mother' of the 'beloved disciple' (19:25-27) – and mother of all members of the Church.

Whereas John situates the birth of the Church at Calvary, Luke places it at Pentecost. Consequently, it is in the Jerusalem community following the death and resurrection of Jesus that Mary plays a pivotal role in the *Book of Acts*. She stands with the apostles and the other women as true believer and first disciple (1:12-14). Evidently, Luke draws a parallel between Mary's role at the Annunciation and her new role as first among the community of faithful disciples who wait upon the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.
Perceiving Mary as true believer and first disciple has the advantage of placing Mary *within* the Church rather than above it. Certainly, we need also recognise that Mary stands as the pre-eminent member of the ecclesial community: this is evidenced in the Catholic doctrines of Mary's perpetual virginity, her immaculate conception and her assumption body and soul into heaven. However, this should not detract from our appreciation of Mary as "truly our sister, who as a poor and humble woman fully shared our lot" (Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, #56).

Just as our recovery of the genuine humanity of Jesus has been an important aspect of our renewal of Christian faith, so too we need to recover a genuine scriptural understanding of the human reality of Mary of Nazareth, Calvary and Pentecost. What we then find is that all the glories that have been placed on Mary in our Catholic tradition are founded on her human qualities of love, justice and faith in the living God of Israel. In this sense, she is "truly our sister", one with whom we can identify in our own attempts to be faithful disciples of Jesus.

A Joan Osborne song of some years ago on the Top-Forty poses the question: "What if God was one of us?" Despite the Gospel stories of Jesus and Mary, we might get the impression that holiness and humanness are not very compatible at all. The central mystery of our Christian faith should tell us otherwise: God has become *one of us* in Jesus and *one with us* in the messiness of our human lives. Without Mary's responsiveness to this God of love and compassion, Jesus of Nazareth would not have been born. Moreover, the Gospels also hint that without Mary's faith and discipleship the Church would not be.

Consequently, viewing Mary as a model for our faithful discipleship within the Church seems to be an important way of remembering that God relies on the fragile reality of human lives to fulfil the divine plan of salvation. In this context, our view of Mary's holiness is enhanced rather than diminished.
when we see her as one of the powerless poor, an outsider whose pregnancy is the cause of rumours, the suffering woman whose son is cruelly put to death. Women especially can find in Luke's Mary a woman who is remembered as young, betrothed, travelling, pregnant, oppressed, refugee, married, celebrating, mature, widowed, courageous, prayerful, ministering.

The image of Mary has too often been portrayed as a passive type with little or no say in what happens in her life. A proper reading of the Gospels does not allow us to be satisfied with such a benign picture of the mother of Jesus. To the contrary, Mary as first disciple sings the song of God's justice to all the oppressed and voiceless of the earth. She reveals the Spirit of God actively at work in her life. She stands with the sorrowful in their pain. She ministers to and with the disciples in the new community of Jesus' disciples. She keeps hope alive in the face of despair.

The Mary story has always had a special place in Catholic life and devotion. This story needs to be rekindled today in context of a Church newly aware of its own brokenness and fragility. If we are to be the community of the faithful disciples of Jesus we need to name our human reality with all its pain and fear – and then, like Mary, believe in and work for a world and a Church where God's reign of justice, peace and love will arrive.