

The Gospel According to Mary

Luke 1:26-33

In our New Testament we have Gospels bearing the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is almost certain that all these accounts were written by persons who had no personal contact with Jesus. The Gospels are the products of research, memory, and discussion. They bring together stories about Jesus and the teachings and conversations that his followers remembered. I personally believe that in the same way God guides us today God's Spirit was active in the preparation of the Gospels. I also believe that much of the material in them came from eyewitness sources. I trust the essential message of the Gospels, but sometimes I wish we had more direct information about the Christ event and a more personal interpretation of it.

In the first chapter of Luke there is an account close to what I'm talking about. It is a song of praise attributed to Mary, the mother of Jesus. I like to call it "The Gospel According to Mary." Why should Mary not have her own Gospel? She was uniquely qualified to write one. She was there in the beginning. It was she who heard the angel in Nazareth. It was she who bore the scorn of the community as just another pregnant but unmarried teenager. It was she who endured the pain of childbirth and fretted over the health of the child.

It was Mary who patiently moved to Egypt and back to Nazareth, all the while wondering what God had in store for her and her family. It was Mary who watched her oldest son leave home and the carpenter's shop to embark on a vague, itinerant mission. It was Mary who felt rebuffed when one day she sent word to Jesus that his mother wanted to see him and heard him say that whoever did the will of God was his mother and his brother.

It was she who heard the whispers of conspiracy about him and worried for his safety. It was she who watched at the foot of the cross as he died an excruciating, humiliating death. She was there! The disciples who claimed allegiance had fled. But Mary was there. It was she who, given over to the care of John, went to live out her last days in Ephesus, far from home and kindred. Simeon, the old man in the temple who blessed the Mary's baby, had said that she would have great joy but that also she would have a sword pierce her heart. He had been right. It was Mary who experienced the agony and the ecstasy as mother of the Christ.

Yes, I think Mary was eminently qualified to write a Gospel. Mary's Gospel is called the Magnificat, so named for the Latin translation of the first line, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Perhaps you've never paid much attention to this piece. Sometimes portions of it are set to music. We call the Magnificat a song, and maybe we think of it as a lullaby or a simple cradle song. If so, we have not really read it. Missionary E. Stanley Jones called the Magnificat "the most revolutionary document in the world." C. S. Lewis said, "The Magnificat is terrifying. It should make our blood run cold."

Do comments such as these make you a little more curious? They make me want to look a little more closely at Mary's statements. I think I agree. Mary's Gospel is revolutionary. Some might dismiss the whole thing with a sweep of the hand and argue that a girl of fifteen or sixteen could not have composed these lines. I used to take that approach. But I no longer doubt that a girl like Mary could have put these ideas together.

For one thing it is a collection of statements from the Book of Samuel. Mary would have known these passages. A second-century document called the *Protoevangelium* says that Mary was born in Jerusalem, the child of elderly parents, Joachim and Anna, who belonged to the priestly family. If so, she would have known the scriptures. Also, the Magnificat is not a whimsical, utopian statement. It is an affirmation of what God is about. The subject is God himself. Anything that focuses on what God is doing is revolutionary.

Enough background! What does Mary's Gospel say? What kind of Gospel is it? Like any good work on Jesus and the kingdom, it is first and foremost a Gospel of grace. It speaks of God's gracious activity. "My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary said, "for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden" (v. 48); "He who is mighty has done great things for me" (v. 49).

The Gospel, the good news, begins at that point. It begins with what God has done and what God does. The word for "low estate" is the same term used by Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in her prayer for a child. There it is translated "affliction." Hannah's "affliction" or "low estate" or "need" had to do with childlessness. The birth of Samuel met that need. In Mary's song the birth of a child satisfies not only a personal need but a need of humankind. The appearance of her child demonstrates God's gracious action. In Christ God's grace is visible and understandable.

That's important, for much in religion is confusing and misleading. I read a story once about an old missionary who struggled for many years in a lonely ministry. Finally his mission board wrote to tell him that they had raised enough money to send him an assistant. They sent a young fellow who had just finished seminary. He was committed, the letter said, and bright and scholarly. When the new missionary arrived at the station, a meeting was called. The chief and all the people of the tribe came out to welcome him. After a brief ceremony they asked the young man to say a few words. He did not know the language, so the older missionary said he would translate.

Excited at the opportunity to deliver his first sermon, the new missionary began a well-rehearsed address: "We mortals must always remember that there is an infinite and qualitative distinction between the eternal gospel and all the historical manifestations of it under the varied contingencies of human experience." The old missionary stood dumbfounded for a moment as the young man waited for him to translate. Finally, the wise old man turned to the people and said, "My friends, he says he loves you and he is glad to be here!"

We don't need professionalism. We don't need theology. We need to know that God understands us, that his mercy is upon us, that he does mighty things in our behalf. A young Jewish girl named Mary recognized that. Her Gospel begins with grace.

The Gospel According to Mary is also a Gospel of incredible social change: "God has routed the proud and all their schemes; he has brought down monarchs from their thrones, and raised on high the lowly" (vv. 51-52). Mary's son would put an end to discrimination, to stereotyping people and applying labels. Mary's Gospel speaks of social justice and affirms that every person is of equal importance before God and that every person receives God's infinite love.

Do you ever wonder how much of Jesus' value system was passed on to him by his mother? Did Mary teach Jesus her favorite stories from the scriptures? My guess is that her influence was profound.

Albert Camus, the French novelist, said shortly before his death that two things remained as the significant factors in his life and writing. One was the Algerian sunscape—the brilliance of the sun on sand and sea. Scenes from the desert, he said, never left his mind. The other, more powerful influence, was his mother. His mother was mute; she never spoke a word. His father died in World War I when Camus was a year old. His mother worked as a cleaning lady to support her son. She left early in the morning and returned late at night. Camus had a strange, mystical relationship with her all those years, enhanced by the fact that they lived in silence. Her immutable presence, he said, stood solidly at the center of all that he had ever written or accomplished.

If you look at Mary's world view in the Magnificat and then look at what Jesus did and said, you see the influence of Mary. We must look forward to the time when Christians take Mary's song and Jesus' words seriously. Theological conservatives and liberals debate over whether to take Biblical passages literally or symbolically. In my view everyone takes Mary's song symbolically. And it

should be taken literally! God really is at work overturning the world's systems. Jesus proclaimed that. And he learned much of it at his mother's knee.

Third, Mary's song speaks of ministry. She says, "God has filled the hungry with good things and has sent the rich away empty...He has not forgotten to show mercy" (vv. 53-54). Some have said that this is the "feminine" side of the Gospel. Men speak of conquest and proclamation. They want to win the world, destroy evil, and establish the kingdom. Mothers care for the helpless; they quietly provide for their children.

Mary's Gospel calls us to care for the powerless, to feed the hungry, to liberate the oppressed, to found hospitals, to share wealth, to minister. The church has heard both calls. Interestingly, the church's record on this side is much more impressive. If quiet service is more "feminine," we need Mary's Gospel and its appeal.

The Gospel According to Mary is a powerful thing. It is terrifying! It's also strongly inviting. It speaks of God's grace; it tells about a dynamic revolution in personal, social, and political life. It refers to a providential God who has a purpose and who is at work bringing that purpose to pass.

The skeptic isn't going to accept this. No young girl, one will say, is capable of producing this kind of message. I disagree. There is a way. It's found in Mary's response to the angel. When Gabriel came to Mary to announce the birth of the Christ, she did not hesitate to say, "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." That's the key.

J. William Harris

21 December 2008