

North Kildonan United Church

20th December 2020 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“The Joy of Mary”

Romans 16: 25-27

Luke 1: 26-38

Luke 1: 47-55

God and maker of all, to redeem the world you chose the most unsuspecting of women to mother your Son and by your choice gave new glory to human flesh and earthly parenting.

With the joy that was Mary's, may our souls magnify the Lord, and our bodies be the means through which you continue the mighty work of salvation for which Christ came. Amen.

Many years ago a friend of mine gave me, as a bit of a joke actually, a Virgin Mary pencil sharpener. This was during her time in the Roman Catholic Church, before her moving to the Anglican Church, where she now serves as an Anglican priest.

She knew that I was a good Protestant and she knew it was something I certainly would never buy for myself. I'm not sure where that pencil sharpener has gone but I'm pretty sure I haven't thrown it away.

Whenever I did see it, or actually use it to sharpen a pencil, I would think of the giver of the gift, not the Virgin Mary depicted. Perhaps a Roman Catholic would regard the pencil sharpener differently.

The place of Mary within Christian teachings, worship and practice is one of those dividing points between Catholics and Protestants. Not as sharp a division as in years gone by but still, the difference of opinion remains.

I saw that difference portrayed years ago on a visit to 17 Wing, the air-force base in Winnipeg. A few ministers, myself included, were making a pastoral visit to the base and meeting with the military chaplains. At one point we were taken to the chapel, which in those days was primarily used by Protestants and Roman Catholics.

On a typical Sunday, one group would hold worship followed after an interval by the other group. Since many Christian denominations might be using the chapel, the design of the sanctuary was multi-purpose and non-denominational, allowing for a speedy transition from Catholic to Protestant services.

In showing us around, the chaplain directed our attention to a couple of cupboard doors at the front of the chapel, on one side and several feet up. He opened the doors and pulled out a rolling shelf. On the shelf stood a statue of the Virgin Mary, not dissimilar to the smaller version I have as a pencil sharpener.

He told us that for Catholic services Mary makes her appearance but for Protestant services she is hidden away behind the doors.

Protestant denominations, including ours, have quite successfully hidden Mary away from our worship, our hymns, our stained glass, our religious art, our preaching, our devotion and our prayers.

During the Reformation there were many who reacted strongly against what they saw as an excess of devotion to the Mother of Jesus. Popular piety of the 1500s and the 1600s sometimes placed Mary on a par with Jesus, as a person who provided, through prayer to her, an avenue to God. Later Catholic teaching intensified and elevated the understanding of Mary.

Meanwhile, Protestants have spent little time with Mary. We are familiar with the angel Gabriel announcing to her that she will be the mother of Jesus, we might recall her request of Jesus for more wine at a wedding and we might wonder at the sharp reply Jesus gives to his mother, and on Good Friday we might reflect on Mary's anguish as she stands at the base of the cross, watching her son die, although there are more references to her in scripture.

We note her presence in these essential events in the life of Christ, but it doesn't really go much further. Perhaps today we can make a start at amending that.

But first...the title of today's sermon comes from a medieval song called Joys Seven, referring to what was seen as the seven joys Mary experienced. If you have Christmas music recorded at home, you may hear this carol.

*The first good joy that Mary had it was the joy of one
To see the blessed Jesus Christ when He was first her son
When He was first her son, good man: and blessed may he be
Both, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to all eternity.*

The carol goes on to describes how Jesus made the lame to walk, the blind to see, how Jesus read the Bible and brought the dead alive. The final two verses speak of the crucifixion and the resurrection.

*The next good joy that Mary had it was the joy of seven;
To see her own son, Jesus Christ, to wear the crown of heaven.
To wear the crown of heaven, good man and blessed may he be
Both, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to all eternity.*

It's a splendid English Christmas carol, well worth listening to, in my humble opinion.

In the Christmas story, after Jesus was born and the angels and the shepherds came and went their various ways, we are told that when Mary heard the message told to the shepherds, she *"treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."*

I invite you to ponder in your own hearts the following understandings of Mary from a Protestant, Reformed perspective. A perspective that we might see as complementary to how our Roman Catholic friends may understand Mary.

We begin with Mary's consent to God's call to be the mother of Jesus. Earlier we heard of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary, declaring that Mary has found favour with God and that she will be the one who will bear a child who will fulfill God's promises to Israel and bring in the Kingdom of God.

Her acceptance of this role begins her pilgrimage of faith. She hears the call of God and she responds to this call, trusting in the one who has invited her into this new life. Mary lives out Christian faith and discipleship by hearing the word of God and freely agreeing to do as God requests. How many after Mary will hear the word of God and live lives of service and mission in God's name. For Christians, it all begins with Mary's declaration: *"Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word."*

In her great song of joy, the Magnificat as it is called in Latin, the Song of Mary, we hear of Mary's solidarity with the poor. Her song of praise gives voice to those in need, to the poor and the broken people yearning for God's redemption. And Mary knew well what it meant to be poor. She was young, unwed, and a mother-to-be, a highly vulnerable woman who nevertheless trusts in God.

So she sings: *"He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."* Revolutionary proclamation that has made more than one tyrant try to silence the voice of the church, the voice of the people.

In her clear expression of God's justice and concern for the poor and distressed, Mary lives out and shows us our Christian responsibility for caring for those in need.

Mary was clearly a woman of faith and like all people of faith, she was continually growing in her faith and understanding. She was at times confused, so too at times are we.

No doubt she knew anxiety and fear about her son, aware of the dangers he often faced.

Mary was fully human, with human gifts and human limitations. In the gospel accounts we catch glimpses, just glimpses of Mary not quite understanding what Jesus was doing, also not an uncommon reality between a parent and a child, even today.

As his mother, Mary no doubt assumed she held a special place in her son's heart. But Jesus could not afford to limit his attention to a small group, including his mother. In Mark we hear him say: *"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."* (Mark 3:35). Similarly, the Cana wedding scene in John's gospel has Jesus rather roughly telling his mother, after she inquired about the wine supplies, *"Woman, what*

concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." (John 2:4). I can picture my own mother's face if I had ever addressed her that way.

But through her interactions with Jesus, Mary showed that Christian discipleship involves growing in understanding and always being reformed by the Word of God. Her ideas, her role in her son's life, were continually being challenged and reshaped, which is also the story of the denomination to which we belong.

As Jesus suffered on the cross, we are told that Mary stood under that cross, faithfully accompanying her son on his final earthly journey. This is an example of Mary's call to ministry, a call that echoes down through the centuries to the present day. Mary's ministry, begun with Jesus' birth, was one of accompanying Jesus throughout his life. She became part of a new family, a community sustained by God's grace and created by Christian discipleship. As Jesus hung on the cross he commended his mother to the care of the beloved disciple, an example of the mutual care and ministry this new community would be based upon.

The Christian church would be more than a closed group. It would include all, and create for many a second family and a new community, a family not based on lineage but on faith in God and ministry to others.

Finally Mary was a woman of faith. We can trust that she was a pious Jew, familiar with prayer and meditation. Luke twice tells us, in the second chapter of his gospel, that she pondered the words and events of Jesus' birth and boyhood and treasured them in her heart. (Luke 2:19; 51b)

After the crucifixion and resurrection, but before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the book of Acts tells us that Mary was in constant prayer with the disciples and other women, praying for the coming Spirit of God. Mary's example encourages us in our own discipleship to pray for God's renewing and empowering Spirit to be with us.

These are but five examples of what Mary might mean to us Protestants. Perhaps it's time to open the cupboard doors and allow Mary to become more a part of the church that her son created.

After Vatican II, many Roman Catholic churches were renovated. One church in Mexico has a large crucifix hanging over the altar. But on the left wall, at the front of the church, there is a simple, modest, unadorned figure of Mary. She is just there, not drawing any attention to herself. She stands, as it were, among the people of God and her eyes are turned to the cross.

Both Protestants like us and our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers could easily make this picture of Mary, the one who looks to her son, the one who helps direct us to her son, as a picture we might all embrace. Amen.