

Sermon - Mary, the second Eve

Jesus as the second Adam

- As we celebrate the feast of Mary, Mother of our Lord, it can be helpful to consider one of the earliest traditions of the Church - that Mary was symbolically another Eve.
- Firstly, in two of Paul's letters he compares Jesus with Adam:

Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. (Romans 5.14)

For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. (1 Corinthians 15.21-22)

Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. (1 Corinthians 15.45-47)
- While none of the New Testament writers contrasted Mary with Eve, other early theologians were taken by Paul's comparison of Adam and Jesus, with Jesus being referred to as the second, or last, Adam.
- So it was a small step to then make a similar comparison between Eve and the other woman who had played such a significant role in the birth and nurturing of the second Adam - his mother, Mary.

Eve's temptation

- One of the key aspects of Eve is her succumbing to temptation to help herself to fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
- There are different perspectives on that story of Adam and Eve eating fruit from the tree that they understood God had forbidden them to eat from.
- The particular aspect that applies here is that Eve saw that the fruit would give her wisdom.
- Throughout Holy Scripture we are urged to desire God's wisdom, and so Eve's desire was not wrong in itself.
- However, the key aspect is that it was something that she wanted for herself, for her own benefit.
- Also there was a natural consequence to the gaining of the knowledge of good and evil.
- Eve, and Adam, were previously innocent, and in that state of innocence could interact directly and personally with God.
- There was nothing to interfere with or damage their direct relationship with God.
- As soon as they disobeyed God, and their innocence was destroyed, they lost their trust in God, and their direct personal relationship with him.
- This was symbolised by way of angels guarding the way back into Eden.

Mary as the second Eve

- Now if we compare Mary with Eve, we can see how she came to be seen as a second Eve - getting it right where Eve had got it wrong.
- In various ways Mary is given the attributes of innocence.
- Over the centuries theologians have ascribed to Mary the idea of having been herself born free from sin, so as to enable Jesus to have been born in a state of sinlessness - the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.
- Furthermore, there is the dogma of her Perpetual Virginity.
- Regardless of your own opinions about these ideas, the effect of them was to promote Mary's innocence, and her consequential direct personal relationship with God.
- These serve as an effective contrast with Eve's relationship with God.
- Where Eve desired wisdom for her own benefit thus leading to a broken relationship with God, Mary was open to direct communication with God.

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- She heard God's invitation to be the bearer of God's Son - who was also known as the Wisdom of God.
- And she was humbly obedient - not to fulfilling her own desire for wisdom for herself, but to fulfilling God's desire for Wisdom for the world.
- The consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience is that humankind was cut off from a direct personal relationship with God.
- The consequence of Mary's obedience in bearing and raising Jesus - and also of Jesus' own obedience in fulfilling his purpose as the Anointed One of God - is that humankind is invited to respond to the restored opportunity to enjoy once again a direct personal relationship with God.
- What Eve got wrong in her motives and actions, Mary righted in her own motives and actions.
- And once again, this was also symbolised through the presence of angels highlighting the way to the new Eden.

The Mother of All

- There is another significant comparison between Eve and Mary.
- Eve is recognised as being symbolically the mother of all humankind: we are all daughters or sons of Eve.
- Similarly, Mary - as the first Christian, the first to accept Jesus as the Christ - can be understood as the mother of the Church - of all Christians.
- Most of the stories about Mary in the Gospel accounts are the nativity stories found in Luke and Matthew.
- However, John's account adds some further details.
- In that Gospel account the first miracle described is Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding feast - and he does so at his mother Mary's direction.
- Also, on the cross, Jesus connects his mother Mary and his disciple John to each other, so that John then takes over the responsibility of the eldest son for Jesus' mother.
- Finally, there is the inclusion of Mary with the rest of the disciples when they are meeting together in prayer before the Pentecost event:

All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (Acts 1.14)

- And so just as Mary gave birth to Jesus - to his physical body - so Mary was involved at Pentecost at the birth of the Church - the metaphysical body of Christ.
- We need to remember that Mary not only gave birth to Jesus, but she also raised him.
- She was not only responsible, along with Joseph, for nurturing him physically, but in all other respects as well.
- She taught Jesus all the basics of life, and of living - how to relate to others, how to be kind and caring, and so on.
- She would have taught him how to love God, and talk to and listen to God.
- Jesus became open to being baptised by the Spirit as a direct result of how Mary and Joseph had raised him.
- So it makes sense that Mary would have continued to have had a vital role in nurturing the early church community.
- No doubt she would have helped to remember and tell the stories about Jesus, and the stories told by Jesus.

The woman with the moon and the stars

- So there is one final piece of Scripture that is particularly fitting for us to hear.

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- It comes from the book written by our own patron saint, St John the Divine.
- Don't worry about the other details - just focus on the details about the woman:

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. (Revelation 12.1-6)

- At times the woman in this description was understood to be Mary, and so some pictures show her standing on a crescent moon, with twelve stars in a halo around her head.
- Modern scholarship regards the woman described in this passage not as Mary, but as a personification of the Church.
- For myself, I'm content to conflate the two ideas, because for me Mary both represents the Church and helped to mother the Church.

As Mary, so too us

- And just as Mary brought Jesus into the world, so the Church continues to bring Jesus to the world.
- We can be inspired by Mary, the first Christian - the archetypal Christian.
- Just as Mary was open to hearing God's word for her, we are encouraged to be open to hearing God's word for us.
- Just as Mary was humbly obedient in fulfilling God's purpose, we are also encouraged to the same humble obedience in fulfilling God's purpose.
- Just as Mary nurtured the physical person of Jesus, we are also encouraged to nurture the presence of Jesus amongst us.
- Just as Mary gazed at Jesus on the cross, we are also encouraged to gaze upon Jesus in adoration.
- And just as Mary prayed with the other disciples in anticipation of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, so we are likewise encouraged to pray with each other for the Spirit to renew the life of our own faith community.
- So may you be inspired and encouraged by the second Eve: Mary, the mother of our Lord.

Note: all quoted Scripture is from the NRSV