

## Mary's Saviour

Christmas art depicts Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the angels in an idyllic setting. It is all sweetness and peace. The story of the Saviour's birth has become so familiar that it is easy to miss the message behind the facts. But the story is not sweet and for children only. It is full of drama, the turning point in history. The manner of His coming is the greatest miracle since creation itself. He came to earth not in a raging whirlwind, not with the sound of trumpets. He came in the glory of humility. The Creator of heaven and earth, of all things, entered a virgin's womb. He "made himself nothing... He humbled himself," said the apostle Paul. God came in the flesh, as a baby who could not speak or eat solid food, who depended on a young Jewish couple for shelter, food, care, and love.

When Mary saw the appearance of the angel Gabriel, Luke tells that she was "greatly troubled" and "afraid." Her reaction to the annunciation that she would become the mother of the Son of the Most High whose kingdom will never end was not one of immediate joyful acceptance. She had something far more mundane on her mind. She asked Gabriel, "How will this be since I am a virgin?" Mary was a chaste, godly young woman. She had kept herself pure according to God's law. Matthew tells of Joseph unselfishly agreeing to divorce Mary in private rather than press charges he was legally entitled to until an angel shows up to correct his perception of betrayal. When Joseph heard "what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20), he took her home as his wife. The gospels plainly state that the Child born of Mary was not Joseph's child but had a supernatural parentage and was fully divine, as He Himself claimed (cf. Mark 2:5-7; John 8:58).

Luke does not put Mary on a pedestal. She is not the focus of his Christmas account. Luke doesn't celebrate Mary's virtues qualifying her as the Saviour's mother. He also offers no details about her accomplishments in child rearing, no accounting of her sacrifices for her Child, no praise of her restraints in grief at Jesus' death. He identifies his epistle and the book of Acts as the "events that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1). Those events focus on God and God's action through Mary's Son on behalf of Israel and the Gentiles – not on Mary herself. The emphasis on His birth, then, is not upon Mary, but upon Jesus, born of the virgin.

When Mary responded to the annunciation with the words, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." She took a bold step into the unknown. From the response to the angel's announcement until her death, Mary's destiny was shaped by that of her Child. This is soon evident in the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of her Son in danger and poverty, the flight to a strange country with all the rigours of exile, and ultimately watching her Son's crucifixion. Luke tells of a fearful Mary hurrying off to the one person who could possibly understand what she was going through. She went to her relative Elizabeth, who miraculously got pregnant in old age after another angelic annunciation. Elizabeth believes Mary's story and shares her joy, but the scene poignantly highlights the contrast between the two women: the whole countryside is

excitingly talking about Elizabeth who is expecting a baby at her great old age, even as Mary must hide the shame of her own miracle. Yet Elizabeth felt honoured to have Mary, the mother of her Lord, come to her (Luke 1:43). Mary responded with a song of praise and confession. It has become known as the "Magnificat", her hymn of praise to God for His dealings with her (Luke 1:46-55). The term Magnificat comes from the first word Mary speaks in verse 46 in the Latin translation: "My soul exalts the Lord." The Magnificat clearly shows that Mary was an Israelite woman steeped in the Scripture. She draws from 1 Samuel 2 (Hannah's Prayer), many of the Psalms, and even Job. Though spoken in the context of her meeting with Elizabeth, Mary proclaims the great deeds of God to "all generations." The Magnificat is the Church's song because it is the song of the mother of our Lord. Mary has set an example for worship. In her song, she teaches the Church praise, thanksgiving, and confession. The majority of the Church's songs are prayers. When we realize this fact, we would pay more attention to what we are singing. The Magnificat is also next in importance to the Lord's Prayer. Martin Luther said, "If you want to pray for all the earth, take the Our Father. Here (in the Magnificat) you have the general thanksgiving for all things, also for our own affairs."

Mary also says: "My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." To rejoice in the salvation of God was something the Jewish tradition would have taught Mary from an early age. From the earliest books of the Bible, the people of Israel had praised God and given thanks for their deliverance. No doubt Mary thought of the Passover feast in commemoration of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery. She must have recalled the stories of God's protection of the Israelites as they trekked for forty years through the wilderness. For the people of Israel, the Saviour God was the Protector God, both delivering the people and keeping them safe. But in ancient Israel salvation was also associated with deliverance, not just from physical evil, but also from spiritual and moral evil. God was the One who through the prophets called the people to repentance and offered them redemption. He was the One who through the sacrifices of the priests forgave the wrongs of the people and showed mercy.

When Mary was born, the full redemption, which had been promised, and anticipated in so many of the Jewish rituals and celebrations, had not yet been fulfilled. The hope of the people of Israel was for the Christ of God, the Messiah, the one for whom they waited and watched. Every young Jewish girl hoped to become the mother of the Messiah. No wonder Mary was overjoyed when she heard the news that God had chosen her to become the mother of His Son. She was overwhelmed by the sheer wonder of the reality of God. Her sense of amazement was transformed to awe and rejoicing. C.S. Lewis summed it up so well when he talked about his own conversion from atheism to Christianity. He was, as in the title of his book, *Surprised by Joy*. It is also significant that Mary refers to God as her Saviour. In the song of rejoicing, Mary is acknowledging personally that God is the Saviour of the world. Mary, a humble handmaid (female servant of God) was in need of salvation and a Saviour. She was born a sinful human being. In each of the four gospels Mary is presented as a woman who is in many respects very much like one of us. In our concern to honour Mary as the mother of our Lord, we must also see how much she comes across as an ordinary believing woman. Mary too brought before God whatever fears, or pain, lack of trust, or

shortcomings invaded her life and heart. Mary did not rely upon herself for her salvation. She did not call attention to her own abilities that may have helped her to be true to God through challenging times. Mary, like believers of all ages, rejoiced in her Saviour God. Just as every other woman of faith in her day and before, she recognized her need of God as her Saviour and Redeemer. In the Magnificat, Mary was not confessing any personal sin. She was simply adding her voice to those who have gone before, and counting herself amongst the delivered ones. God must be her Saviour before she can offer Him to others. Mary's faith was not the achievement of merit, but the gift of grace. When we praise and love the virgin Mary, it is God whom we praise for His gracious favour shown to His chosen handmaid. God's divine choice is the source of both Mary's blessedness and the virgin birth. The blessing is found in the grace of God that sought her out, not in anything within her, or anything done to her.

Mary did not fully comprehend Gabriel's annunciation. How could she, a mortal, fathom the mystery of the living God and His redeeming work! But she was capable of something which is more than understanding, she was granted the gift of faith to accept her motherhood of the Son of the Most High. Mary was the first person to accept Jesus on His terms, regardless of personal cost. She believed. Again and again she had to confirm that belief. Her faith was greater and more heroic than that of any other human being. Her faith persevered even on Calvary, where she witnessed the horrific crucifixion of her Son - this was Mary's inimitable greatness. Mary confessed her need of the Saviour. We are called upon to do the same. At Christmas we are given another opportunity to focus on One who never disappoints, assuming our expectations are in the right place and our faith in the right Person. What does Christmas mean? When the incarnate God appeared within this world, it was to rescue the beauties of creation from the torments of fallen nature. He also came to rescue us. He entered the world as the Word through Whom "all things consist" (Co.1:17). When we know Christ as Saviour, we – like Mary – can sing and rejoice. Because of His saving work we are assured of the victory that is yet to come. Christians journey from the manger to the empty tomb. For now, we live amid a strife of darkness and light, falsehood and truth, death and life. But the victory is the Lord's. "Be of good cheer," Jesus tells His apostles; "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

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