Reverend Jim's Sermon for December 17, 2023

Mary as Mother, Witness and source of Love

There is so much change in our world, some good and some seemingly not so good, and some that, well, remains to be seen.

One thing that has changed is the increasing influence and power of the feminine. There has been a lot written about feminine and masculine energy and what that all means but let me just give a practical example: When I came into this diocese, about 20 years ago, the bishop was male and 85 to 90 percent of the clergy was male. Now we have a woman bishop, and far more than half of the clergy are women. I can tell you; Clergy Days are not the way they used to be. There is a lot of feminine energy at these gatherings, and for me, anyway, it's mostly positive. But it is a change.

In the Advent Bible study we are exploring the place of Mary the Mother of Jesus in the Gospels. And whenever we look closely or reflect deeply on Mary, we always encounter this idea of the sacred feminine, and how it (she) might fit into our understanding of the divine, and into our own lives.

It has been very interesting to hear how those in the study group have encountered Mary in their lives and in their faith journey.

So, how are we to understand Mary? One of the traditional ways throughout history of understanding and appreciating Mary has been to bestow on her different names. The Greek Christians call her Theotokos, which means "She who gave birth to God". This designation of Mary, not just as the mother of Jesus, but as the Mother of God, caused some conflict in the early church. There was a faction that wanted to call Mary Christotokos, the one who gave birth to the Christ. The decision to use Theotokos came in the 5th century. It was a loftier way of thinking about Mary's place in the Christian religion. But if Jesus was God, and Mary was his mother. . .

There is a metaphorical significance to Mary bringing God into our world, of giving birth to the divine.

I saw this quote just yesterday from the French Jesuit, theologian and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

"In the humanity which is begotten today, the Word prolongs the unending act of God's own birth; and by virtue of God's immersion in the world's womb, the great waters of the kingdom of matter have, without even a ripple, been imbued with life. The immense host which is the universe is made flesh."

In simple terms, the God who was born in Jesus 2000 years ago, continues to be born into the world, into our hearts, and through us into the lives of those we touch. We are called no less than Mary to give birth to the divine, and Advent is a time to engage in practice that helps us to be God-bearers and God birthers.

So, how do we prepare ourselves to bring God into the world in a new way? To give birth to the divine in our little part of the world?

You won't be surprised if I suggest that Mary herself gives us some significant guidance on this.

The first step to birthing God is saying yes; saying yes to the unknown. Mary didn't know what the future would bring when she said yes to the Angel Gabriel, and neither do we know what the future holds when we commit and recommit ourselves to a God-directed life.

We are all called to agree to a future that is unknown. If we only agreed to those things we could be sure of we wouldn't need faith, and without faith God cannot be born.

We must embrace the darkness of uncertainty, not with fear, but with joy, and with trust, because it is in the darkness that life is formed, that creativity has its source, it is in the darkness that spiritual energies of faith and love are formed.

Letting go of control, letting go of judgments, not making everything either good or bad. Welcoming what comes. This is the practice of Advent.

Beside acting as the mother who birthed the divine, Mary had another important role to play in the life of Jesus, that of witness.

We read in Luke these words that come at the end of the nativity story: "And Mary treasured all these things in her heart and pondered them."

This is such a mother thing to do, isn't it? To treasure the little things that mark a baby's life, first words, first steps; and the things that mark a child as she or he grows into adulthood, successes and failures, academic degrees, promotions. There are so many times in my life when something happens either wonderful or terrible, and my only thought is that I want to call my mother and tell her about it, and alas, she isn't there to call, she is no longer there to witness my joys and sorrows, and I'm sure like many of you, I miss her witness.

Mary was the one who acted as the witness to Jesus' life, from his first cries to his last breath on the cross. She was there throughout all of it, and she kept it all in her heart where she regarded it as treasure.

This is also a strong metaphor for our own spiritual development: that it is not as important to understand Jesus and his life in a rational way, as it is to allow the stories and teachings of

Jesus to live in our hearts, to ponder them and treasure them. When we do so, we are transformed by them. God didn't send us a favourite book, God sent his only Son. Jesus came not that we would understand who God is, but to experience God's love and grace. And like Mary we are called to remember and witness the wisdom, teachings and life of Jesus and to treasure his life as a mother witnesses and treasures the life of her children. We men can do this too by the way, but we learn how to do it from mothers.

Out of her role as witness comes Mary's role of the one who unconditionally loved Jesus, who almost single-handedly offered a balance to the betrayal, misunderstanding, hatred, harassment, and violence that Jesus was met with in his time on earth. Of course there were those who accepted Jesus and his teaching, the Apostles being foremost. But Mary was the one who remained steadfast from beginning to end, supporting and loving Jesus every day of his life. And even when he "had to be about his father's business", she did not fret or try to hold him back. She freed him to do what he came to do, simply being there to love him through all of it.

Is it really any wonder that Mary has had a prominent place in Christianity. The question as I see it isn't so much why is Mary so important, but why is she not more important in the protestant world. Without Mary there would be no Christmas, without Mary there would be no Jesus, and without Mary there would be no church. Of course, God could have chosen another way to do things, perhaps. We actually have no way of knowing. All we know is that God chose Mary and Mary said yes.

Can we do any less?