

Living the Magnificat

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I'm going to be slightly naughty this evening. It is the first Vespers of the Feast of the Birthday of Our Lady, and so I thought that I would take advantage of the fact that although you are gathered principally to look at ethical matters, as indicated by your Conference's subtitle: "God's Cry for Justice, Mercy and Humility", you have chosen to do so through the words of Our Lady. Now Ethics without grace tends to moralism; and the shape, the pattern of grace, which informs ethics is a far subtler matter, and one much more difficult to pin down, than we usually attend to. So I'm going to try to offer you something in the way of prefatory remarks about the shape of grace which is revealed to us through the presence of Our Lady.

Over the last few years I have been giving, in different places, an adult catechesis course, a sort of introduction to the Christian faith. As time has gone by, I have become increasingly aware of how much more important the presence of Our Lady is in the life of faith and the life of the Church, than I had thought and than seems to be current. I mean her presence not as an add-on extra, or a nice metaphor for talking about the Church corporately, or an obligatory piece of fusty piety, but as a currently active player in the lived out drama of salvation in whose midst we come to be Church. And a currently active player with a far larger and more sophisticated role than has been allowed in these isles for several hundred years. One to whom we have direct access, one to whom we can talk, and from whom we can receive abundantly. In other words, I want to suggest as part of my introduction to the faith that if in our enthusiasm and delight for having been invited into, and being encouraged to play around within, this extraordinarily safe drama which is Christianity we are *not* assumed to be idolaters when it comes to Our Lady, then there may well be something wrong with the way we are receiving and living the Catholic faith.

Let me spin out with you an analogy which, with all its inexactitude, will I hope make the point. My friends know to their cost that I am a member of that small, but completely mad, group of devotees known as Rossini nuts. For some reason the music of the genius of Pesaro gets to us, fills our souls, and cartwheels around with delight in us in a way that no other music does. Well, for the sake of this analogy, please assume that Rossini is God. And that you are attending the opera “The Barber of Seville”, because performances of “Mathilde di Shabran” are so hard to come by. It doesn’t matter which opera: you are attending God’s creation. In this performance of the Barber, the role of Rosina will be sung by a stunning soprano, who we will call Maria. Now the moment the music starts, Rossini is everywhere, permeating everything, his music filling out the spaces and the interstices with creative energy and beat. But Rossini is not visible. It is the music which gives him away, and the music which envelopes you. As the opera develops, different characters come on, among them Rosina, sung by Maria. In a really good performance, it will seem as though the music that she sings is coming through her, that she really is incarnating the person whom the music conjures up. That is: the more herself she really is, the more irrepressible and bubbly and daring and fun and intelligent, the more Rossini’s music will have done what it intended to do.

And when it gets to the end of the opera, the audience will likely go quite mad about her, whooping and cheering and stomping. Now imagine some dour commentator saying “That’s all wrong. They should have been whooping and cheering for Rossini, not for her. In fact, by adoring her in this way, they were undercutting the praise they owed to the composer.” I hope that the excited public would have had the good sense to reply “But this is nonsense: what she did was what Rossini made, and every praise of her falls on him. Rossini’s music wouldn’t have been better if she had kept silent during all the bits when her character sings, so that we only heard Rossini. In fact it was only because she was so exultantly performing Rossini that we heard what Rossini was really about at all. Her performance was Rossini made three-dimensional and fulfilling its creative possibilities”.

Well, this, as I understand it, is what is meant by the first line of the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord”. It means exactly what it says: God is made bigger, magnified, by Our Lady’s soul. The lived-out shape of her bodily life over time is actually going to make God to be more God than before, in just the same way, I would suggest, as a really superlative operatic heroine will make Rossini be more Rossini than he was before

her performance. And Rossini would have been delighted to be made more than he was before by the heroine: that was why he was busy providing the raw material from which the heroine created the role. So we can imagine God delighting in being made spontaneously great in the life of Our Lady. And we can perhaps also imagine the sadness of the angels at those who feel that God's being more is somehow threatened by the really superlative performance of someone who is in no way at all in rivalry with God.

The second line of the Magnificat helps to fill out something about the shape of the role which Our Lady is performing. Her spirit whoops for joy at God her saviour. And ἀγαλλιᾶω, a word which comes into Greek from Biblical sources, really does have that unkempt, unbound quality of exultation which it is the peculiar genius of we northern peoples to have excluded from the serious adult business known as religion. But this is something I would like to emphasize. The presence of Our Lady in the household of faith is hugely tied up with joy, with rejoicing, with bubbling over. Just think how many of the anthems corresponding to Our Lady begin "Gaude!" – "Rejoice!" And how her feasts are all occasions of joy. How tawdry it is that in this country we have just had an August Bank Holiday rather than a holiday for the Assumption. And how impoverished is our understanding of what we have been given when Marian rejoicing is not allowed to pulsate as the constant backdrop to our faith.

So what I would like to do with you now is to begin to develop my operatic image in such a way as to make it more three-dimensional. For there is something rather special about the particular performance of *The Barber of Seville* which we are discussing. For in this performance, Rossini, not content with providing the music, and thus being everywhere in the opera, is actually performing the role of the Count of Almaviva himself. Thus, in addition to being everywhere he is also going to be present in a strictly limited sense. Gioacchino is coming on stage to sing the very demanding tenor role in person. As an historical note, I should indicate that Rossini did have a tenor voice, and occasionally used it to sing in public performance. That he appears to have had a higher sense of its musical worth than did his contemporaries is something in which we unacknowledged heroes or heroines of the operatic shower cubicle can take delight.

So, Rossini is everywhere, as indicated by the music, and he is present in a quite particular sense in the role of the Count of Almaviva. Surely this

will give comfort to our dour commentators! Now they can mutter that Maria, singing Rosina, shouldn't really be given more than tepid applause, while all the applause at the end should go to Rossini, both for his immediate presence in singing Almaviva and for his background presence in having written the whole opera. Again, I hope you would see that this is nonsense. For Rossini to have been a great Almaviva will have required a performance of the whole opera in which the role of Almaviva interacted with the other characters. Almaviva will have helped suggest the character of Rosina into being, by singing with her, or against her, as the scene determines, but producing a tension and that sense of artists sparking off from each other, and becoming more than themselves which is the characteristic of a truly great performance. And of course, it is not only Almaviva who would have sparked off Rosina, but the other way round as well: a Rosina who is on fire in her role will nudge a performing Almaviva into producing a yet more dazzling account of his role. And the public will go nuts at the end in the degree of the affection they have for, and the enjoyment they have received from, each of the characters, but it will certainly not occur to them to think that they should dampen their enthusiasm for the other characters merely because Rossini was on stage rather than in the conductor's box, or behind the scenes.

Well, so far, so obvious. There is in principal nothing about praising a creature which diminishes the honour due to the creator when the creature is being praised for her particular excellence in her living out her creatureliness. And when, as in the Incarnation of our Lord and Saviour, the Creator chooses to act out the role of principal protagonist in a drama set entirely within the bounds of creatureliness, the role of the interacting creatures is made not more opaque, but at least potentially, more magnificent. The presence of the composer as character on stage does not upstage his fellow performers, but rather adds brilliance to them.

Well now let me move even further into my bizarre Rossini heresy (not to be confused with the recently re-habilitated "errors" of Rosmini). This is the moment when we finally move from the theatre into life, so where Rossini instead of being merely a theatrical composer, becomes God, everywhere, and we, instead of being spectators at a theatrical performance become people invited into becoming live participants in the definitive creation of the definitive masterwork called not opera but "Opus Dei" (with apologies to those who are seeking to patent the whole performance for their group). What this means is that as we accept the invitation, so we find ourselves increasingly interacting with the members of the original cast as we take the show live, and as we engage in a

creative multiplying effect. Because of this it is worthwhile thinking a little bit about our relationship to some of those original cast members.

Of course Rossini singing the role of the Count was unforgettable, and of course his performance is likely to be definitive, meaning that it is something that all subsequent lyric tenors who would undertake the role should study to see how it should be done. But it was not definitive in the sense that no one else could ever sing the role again because they wouldn't be he. On the contrary, it was definitive in the sense that it set out the parameters which made it possible for many, many other people to be he. Or, as Someone Else said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it.¹

Again, as an historical aside, Rossini was not at all a control freak in his music: he used to listen to the singers he had to hand first and then actually wrote the arias for them in order to show off their voice at its best, and his music gives singers plenty of chance to run around doing their own thing. Rossini would have been the first to recognise that there are different qualities of tenor voice than the one his physiognomy gifted him with, and that each should see what he could make of the role starting with what he had. Empowering others for flexible imitation is the underlying dynamic of this performance. Just as it is of the performance whose Protagonist is the Incarnate Word.

And of course we are all familiar with the way in which we should learn to perform the role of Rosina in flexible imitation of the way that Maria first sang it. In fact, we tend to get rather too many sententious reminders that Maria's role is the same as ours, that we too should give our consent to the Angel, and bring forth the Word into the world. On the one hand we tend to insist on the unique and sacred nature of the performance carried out for us by the composer when he came onto the scene as protagonist, in a way which obscures the sense of his performing the role so as to make it possible for us to create more wonderful and freer performances. And on the other hand, we have in recent years been taught to insist on the non-unique and non-sacred nature of the leading lady's

¹ John 14, 12-14

role, and how all the really important bits about her role are the ones which we do anyhow, so we don't really need to interact with her. Because of that we tend to downplay the bits of her role which she was the first to do, which she created under very specific circumstances, and which, having been created by her, are marked by her forever.

Please note that these tendencies are just the flip sides of the same quality of rivalistic thinking. It is as though making the one more unique and the other more ordinary could really help us understand the completely non-rivalistic benevolence which went into the composer choosing to enter into the drama as a character in the first place. It was after all He who opted to be on the same level as all the other characters, making the choice not to be more unique and wonderful than they, but interacting with them so that they should all come to share in his unique wonderfulness in ways entirely proper to them. It was the entire performance that he wanted to infuse with his creative spirit.

At this point, to your relief, I would like to let Rossini go back to heaven, where he belongs, so that he can get on with astounding the angels with different ways of getting them to sing different things, at different rhythms, all at the same time. And I would like to step out of my operatic analogy into its primary analogate, which is of course the living performance known as "Our Salvation".

I want to start from the end, which is of course where we always start from. We can only start from the end because we can only tell stories whose end we already know. We recount them forwards, but we compose them backwards. If we don't know the end, then it is not clear what story we are starting to tell, and thus whether we have a story at all. The end of this story, the drama of our salvation, is The Assumption into Heaven of Our Lady and her Coronation. This is, if you like, the maximum declaration of God's victory in Christ, and a sign of the shape of that victory. Of course, the victory was won, the battle was over, the moment that heaven became forever a human story when Christ ascended to the right hand of God, taking a human nature, meaning a lived out human story, to be the paradigm of heaven. But the fullness of the shape of that victory only really becomes clear with the Assumption into Heaven of Our Lady and her Coronation. That is when it becomes quite luminous not merely that we have been saved, but what it is that has been saved, and what it looks like to be saved.

And what it looks like is: creation made new and utterly alive. There was somebody who was entirely part of creation, and she was able to participate in the birth of the new creation in such a way that there was no opposition from her to it, no resistance to the bringing about of the new creation, and because of this, there is an uninterrupted continuity between creation and new creation. And this means: that creation is good! Everything human is in principle good, and to be brought to a good end. The whole of Mary's bodily life, from Immaculate Conception to Dormition and Assumption was good. Which means that in principle, ours is as well. There is nothing intrinsically evil about any part of the human life process, from the fully sexual reproduction by which Mary's parents conceived her, to the moment when her biological finitude reached its proper end in her dormition or death. And so there is nothing intrinsically evil about any part of our human life process. Even though in our case the normal strains and stresses of growth and learning get mixed up with our becoming frightened and so grasping onto too small an identity and resisting being taken into the fullness of creation. In that alone, in our being caught up in resisting being brought to the fullness of creation, we are different from Mary.

The difference is between those for whom our involvement in our being created has to reach us first through our being forgiven, so there is a sense of rupture between who we thought we were, where we were trying to head, and who we now find ourselves coming to be, and the person for whom there was no such rupture. Her life was the, no doubt stretched and strained, continuous movement towards being created and coming to share in the life of the creator without any resistance or rupture. This does not mean that she did not make mistakes, it does not mean that she didn't have to learn, that she found things difficult to understand, that she might have been impetuous, or any other number of character traits. But it means that she was, no doubt without any sense of comparing herself with anyone else, fully implicated in the adventure of being given to be who she was to become.

So, from the end of the story, the Assumption, we see not only that someone has done something for us, which of course they have – that is Jesus' role. We see the beginnings of the living, active shape of what it's like to have that something done for us. But there is more. That the story has come to an end doesn't mean that it is over and done with, its denizens quietly retired to some celestial Eastbourne. On the contrary, it means that in just the same way as Jesus, the self-giving lamb, is alive on the altar in heaven, his victory having been forever sealed, and his self-

giving being made alive for us constantly and given to us, just so the sharers in his risen life, the saints, and first among them, Our Lady, are not only part of a story that is now over, but share in all the living story-empowering creativity of the resurrection life being made available for us now.

If you like: it is not the case that these are lucky people who are just there on the other side of the great divide, and that we are here, stuck on this side, with, in every generation, the same tragic and heroic choices to make, decisions to stick to and so on which might just get us allowed in to the other side, about which we can know nothing. The whole point of the resurrection life being already lived by real people with real names and real life histories, a resurrection life which is cast for us in the shape of the image of creation itself in the Assumed Virgin, is that it means that the great divide is not so great, the other side is even now bending towards us, and tends even to interpenetrate our own side, so the adventure is not one of tragic heroism, but is a much safer story than we normally dare to believe. After all, Salvation that didn't come with an expansive sense of safety wouldn't be worth much.

Now lest you think that in giving you this very highly condensed account of the doctrines of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception I am merely talking about nice doctrinal symbols, I would like to move back from the end of the story to that mid-point in real lived-out history where we can begin to tell it. And I say mid-point since this story is, as I have mentioned, told from the end. But it is a story which had many dress-rehearsals before it was eventually, definitively and triumphantly performed by Mary of Nazareth. St Luke gives us hints of these dress rehearsals in his use of Greek words which reflect previous attempts at the performance which became definitive in Mary. So the Spirit of God will overshadow – ἐπισκιάσει – her² (Luke 1, 35). The dress rehearsals for this include the Ark of the Covenant being overshadowed by the cherubim – συσκιάζοντες³, and the Presence overshadowing the Tabernacle – ἐπεσκίαζεν⁴ – in the book of Exodus. But those were the dress rehearsals, and as all dress rehearsals, in some need of fine tuning. For what we learn in St Luke is that the Ark and the Tabernacle were figures of Mary. And not in Luke alone: also in the book of Revelation the Ark is associated with the woman who is to give birth⁵. And this is

² Like 1, 35

³ Ex 25, 20

⁴ Ex 40, 35

⁵ Rev 11, 19 – 12, 1

much more significant than it seems. Because the whole point of the Holy Place in the centre of the Temple, and indeed of the Tabernacle from earlier times, was that it was through the Holy Place, that God with his angel hosts made creation. The Holy Place was deemed to be outside created matter and the veil which surrounded it was the beginning of material existence. Moving outwards from the veil there were to be found in the Temple the symbols of the days of creation: the lights, the waters, the animals and so on.

A key moment in the liturgical year would be on the Feast of Atonement, when the High Priest, considered to be a temporary incarnation of the divinity, and thus able to be worshipped as YHWH, would come out through the veil, thus symbolizing God coming into the midst of his creation to perform sacrifice for his people. In coming through the veil, he would vest himself with a seamless tunic made of the same material as the veil, thus making the, in principle, Invisible One, materially visible. Now St Luke is more than hinting that all these rites were dress rehearsals for the Real Thing. And the Real Thing took the form of the Great High Priest, YHWH himself, vesting himself with flesh to come into materiality and then go up to Jerusalem to perform the real sacrifice. This is the background imagery, if you like, to what is happening at the Annunciation. Mary is to be the real Holy of Holies, the real Ark bearing the covenant, the real Tabernacle into which Moses could not go. And because it is the real high priest, YHWH himself, the Creator, who is to emerge from her, no man needs to go into her first in order to come out again in different robes, as would have been the case with the High Priests of the Temple.

I stress this, since I think it very important in our post-Freudian era to emphasize that the conception by a Virgin has nothing to do with downplaying sex – a fact underlined by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which makes clear that there is nothing intrinsically problematic about sexual generation. The Virginal conception has everything to do with Creation out of nothing. And this means that what Mary was being invited to do by the Angel was to allow herself to be the link place, the portal, between the Creator out of nothing and the coming into being of everything that is. That is, she was to be in historical fact what the Holy Place had prefigured. It is certainly beyond my imagination to figure what it must have been like for this woman to find that she was becoming the gateway of creation; that one of the angels which ministered to God before the creation was addressing her, inviting her to become the living portal; that she was to become the incarnation,

the permanently contemporary seat, of Wisdom, the feminine figure which accompanied God at the creation of all things; that she would in fact become the one our near worship of whom would correct and fulfil the worship of the goddess whose cult was alive in Jerusalem before Josiah's reformation of the First Temple. This is how Luke says it:

But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.

This is the understatement of the ages!

Of course there is a biological mystery here: where did the necessary extra chromosome come from which alone enables a male child to be conceived? And the only answer I know is a negative one: not from any human paternity, or from within any human structure of desire, parentage, male possessiveness, need to control or propagate. Rather it came in the same way that Creation comes: as something out of nothing. But to be fixated on the biological mystery, which seems to have been of little concern to the ancient authors, is to miss the point of what Mary is being asked to live out. She is living out virgin creation, new, fecund, fresh, ripe with constantly birthing possibilities, not run by men, not tied down into property or chattelage. And instead of doing so in the midst of a huge and heavy sacred structure, such as the Temple was, she is doing so as a living human being, who needs protection in her vulnerability, as is shown when Joseph offers her covering from the potential honour killing which could easily have been the lot of an unwed mother.

So, here we have the Holy Place made suddenly alive as the Creator prepares to vest himself with flesh. In the non-canonical Protoevangelion of St James, Mary is depicted as being involved in weaving the veil of the Temple when the Angel comes to her for the Annunciation. However historically inaccurate this may be in terms of where Mary was living at the time, it shows at least that the symbolism was well understood: what Mary was doing in the nine months of her pregnancy was in fact weaving the veil of flesh which would enable us to see YHWH come into the world. But it is from *her* flesh that she was weaving, and it is her flesh that is thus inextricably caught up with the making new of all things.

This lived out creative performance by Mary continues when she arises and goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears her greeting, John the Baptist leaps for joy in her womb. The verb in Greek is ἐσκίρτησεν and it appears in two significant places: it is the same verb

which in Hebrew describes David dancing about, skipping (מְרַקֵּד) before the Ark in 1 Chronicles 15, where also the arrival of the Ark is greeted with great shouts – and the verb ἀναφώνέω is used of the Levites greeting the Ark and of Elizabeth greeting her cousin. Even more significantly, the same Greek word, σκιρτάω to leap about, puts in its appearance in Malachi 3, 20 (4, 2) where the gender of the protagonist is normally mistranslated but should be:

“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in **her** wings. You shall go forth leaping (σκιρτήσετε) like calves from the stall”

Now please notice what has happened in Luke’s Gospel: what had been cultic objects, used for occasional symbolic acts have become fulfilled by someone, Mary, beginning to live out, slowly, painstakingly, in time, what those cultic objects had been pointing to. What Luke is showing is how Creation out of nothing is becoming history, a real performed, lived-out history, over time. And it is this real performed, lived-out history over time, soon to be opened out through her son’s protagonism so that we may all become its performers and livers-out, which will itself be the crowning perfection of creation.

Thus we have in Luke’s Gospel, as in the others, moments of tension between Mary and Jesus, times when she does not understand, times when she is anxious, times when she has to tuck things away until what they mean can become clearer. And yet this space which includes learning, tension and interaction is the space within which Wisdom, who gives form to creation, allowed Jesus to grow up in Wisdom and in stature. Please notice that these moments of tension, of misunderstanding and so on are not, as it were, embarrassing lapses in what ought to have been a perfectly uninterrupted motherhood, lapses put in so as to test our faith in the Immaculate Conception. They are parts of the creative tensions of the performance, which was being brought into being by real human beings over time, and by real human beings interacting with each other.

It is the whole of that interactive performance which is made alive for us as something *for us*, as something we can be relieved by, not stressed out by. It means that we can reconsider, to give but one example, that very particular fleshly human reality: the bodily eyes of a mother whose expression over time is moulded by her interaction with her child, being patient when the child is impatient, alarmed when the child is over-

confident, tired of the child's mewling and puking, stretched and aged by the whole business of caring at all. There is here all the tension that is proper to Wisdom accompanying creation and making of creation a lived story. And we can consider that it is fully appropriate for us to see all the grace of God available for us through exactly those same time-enriched eyes, which are entirely specific to a woman. Incarnation without living interaction wouldn't be incarnation, and the living interaction then becomes, very properly, part of what the incarnation gives us.

I think this is brought out specifically by John in his treatment of the relationship between Jesus and Mary. In John, Jesus does not talk about "Our Father" as though he has a Father in common with any other human. He talks about "My Father" or "The Father". It is only at the end of the Gospel, after the Resurrection that he becomes inclusive in his language, saying to Mary Magdalene:

"Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."⁶

In other words, John seems to be pointing to a sense in which, until Jesus has gone to his death, and then, in his Ascension created that new space which is death-lived-in-as-moot-for-humans, the real paternity of his Father couldn't yet be shared in by others. It is in his going to death that he makes available that paternity.

It is also curious that in John's Gospel, although the Evangelist is happy to refer to Mary, Jesus' mother, as "his mother", Jesus himself never does. When he addresses her, it is in the seemingly formal vocative – γύναι – "woman!". This is the term he uses at Cana⁷, and from the Cross⁸. And I would like to suggest that, as usual, John is giving us more than seems to be the case. It is as though until Jesus' death, Mary is still in gestation of him, and not giving him birth, but that in his dying, he gives her, in the person of the beloved disciple, a son, the first of many brothers, and names her *his* mother for the first time. The stretching effect of the interaction between Jesus, Mary, the disciples, and the circumstances of his death is seen as opening up both a new shape to

⁶ John 20, 17

⁷ John 2, 4

⁸ John 19, 26

paternity and a new shape to maternity, and this is seen as something creative and deliberate⁹.

What I particularly like about this, is that it does seem to make sense of the oddity of the Miracle at Cana. For there, Mary, off her own bat, and without anyone asking her to intervene, points out to Jesus that “they have no wine”. Jesus appears to rebuke her for jumping the gun, as though she is pushing him into doing something before he is ready for it:

What is there between you and me? My hour has not yet come.

But she is not put off, and tells the servants to do whatever Jesus would tell them, which they duly do. I have long been curious as to why Jesus thought Mary was jumping the gun here, in what is solemnly reported as the first of the signs he worked. And there may be a clue in the book of the prophet Isaiah. As Margaret Barker has pointed out: the Hebrew text of the Qumran manuscript of Isaiah 7, 11, the earliest version which we have extant, and one contemporary with Christ, reads not, as the (later) Masoretic text has it: “ask a sign of the Lord your God” but, with one letter’s difference: “ask a sign from the Mother of the Lord your God”. We may have here a not-yet censored relic from the religion of the first Temple.

This does at least suggest a reason why Jesus should have thought that Mary was jumping the gun. No one had asked her to produce a sign, and yet there she was trying to get her Son to produce one. And Jesus’ hour had not yet come – which means in John the hour of his death. Might it not be that it is only in his creatively occupying the space of death, when he will bequeath to her the first of many disciples who will call her mother that she will properly be called “the Mother of the Lord your God”, and thus one who can properly be approached to ask for signs? It is of course typical of the sort of lived performance that I have been talking about, that the reality of the abundance and the fullness of what was to be given exceeded its proper place in what the characters imagined to be the script, and came rushing out anyhow, giving even more than the author intended.

⁹ Tina Beattie pointed out to me that some commentators have seen in John’s use of “γύναι” a sign that Jesus is designating his mother as Eve, the original woman. This would mean that from the Cross he is the new Adam designating Mary as the new Eve, the mother of all the living.

There is a point here about the shape of what Jesus was bequeathing to us in his going to his death. He was making available the paternity of God as something which could be shared in by others who were not he, but would be becoming he over time – hence the ease with which he speaks of his “brethren” after his resurrection. But, this paternity was not simply something celestial and removed. It did also include, really, the being inducted into a family, a living family of faith, with a real woman who is to be mother of all beloved disciples, a motherhood that is a proper part of the making available for us the celestial paternity.

It is this element of family which I would like to bring out. The interactions in the Gospel story show that there was something rumbustious, slightly out of control, about the family relationships being described. And this I think is something which is a good and proper part of our life in the Church. No matter how po-faced and sententious, ordered and obedient are the dreams of some ecclesiastical males, Mary seems to have a centre of gravity all of her own, one which isn’t pulled in by, and submissive to, ecclesiastical constructs of what her Son would want. And God persists in gifting us with that tension, that sense of more than one centre of gravity as a relief and a freedom from the consequences of our own monistic, univocal, and frightened visions of what is acceptable.

This I think is worth attending to: the “mono” in monotheism can have at least two valencies. One of them is restrictive, zealously hygienic let us say, because God is in rivalry with other gods and needs everything to be narrowed down and made more exact, since the danger of idolatry is everywhere. The other is not in rivalry with anything at all, and is seriously concerned that we will not have enough joy and freedom and happiness unless we are set free from our fear of death and enabled to dare to participate in the life of the Creator. And the more signs of our being loved and encouraged and enabled to belong we can get, the merrier. It is this rumbustiousness of God whose monotheism is decidedly unhygienic, whose oneness is nothing at all like our monisms, trying to get through to us that we are loved, *this* rumbustiousness which means that the shape of the life we are being welcomed into tends to spill over into our world through the prayers and protagonisms of the saints, and chief among them, of course, the portal of the new creation herself, Our Blessed Mother.

So as we turn over the next few days to matters of ethics in the light of Mary’s hymn of praise, may I ask you to remember that non-monistic

rumbustiousness whose different centres of gravity save us from our univocal pictures of God, a rumbustiousness which is kept so much better alive when we are dwellers not in ideological cages, but in a hugely extended family household of spacious dwelling places, and where the heroism and the struggle for the good which we must learn can never entirely swallow the sensation that we are safe, that we are held, that there are others reaching towards us, that whatever may be the immediate appearances, we are in much more of a playground and much less of a war zone than we are inclined to think. Maybe then we will be making room for *Mary's* soul to magnify the Lord.

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Recommended reading:

- Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate* (London: Continuum 2002)
Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge 2006)
Charlene Spretnak, *Missing Mary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2004)
Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest* (London: T&T Clark/Continuum 2003)
Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK 2004)
ARCIC, *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ – An agreed statement* (Harrisburg/London: Morehouse/Continuum 2005)