

FROM THE PULPIT

Mary's Response and Mine

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At Christmas time I like to read the Gospels again. Partly out of tradition, no doubt, and the love of tradition. For in tradition lies much of the special charm and cheer of holidays. But also, I suspect, out of the quiet hope that a new reading, with another year lived, might yield some new understanding. So I read them all again: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John: the four interpretations of what was significant and essential in the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

But I save Luke for the last. For just as I believe, as I suppose most Christians must, that the greatest drama in the history of mankind was the revelation of God to man through the life and mission of Jesus Christ, I also believe that no drama is complete without an audience to receive and respond to it. In effect, the drama of divine revelation is complete only as man responds to it, and the drama is an ever on-going one, since each generation and each individual must attempt to make that response anew. Thence my predilection for Luke, for he is sensitively and sympathetically attuned to the dynamics of this human response. He sees and gives us to see that one of the peculiarities of faith is that though thousands and tens of thousands may believe, each individual must in a certain sense believe alone. He intimates to us that although the truth and significance of Christ are abiding and unchanging, each individual comes to that truth and grasps it and molds himself to it in his own manner, as is manifest, for example, in the lives of Peter and Paul.

And as is manifest, also, in the life of Mary, the mother of Christ, as related by Luke. For Luke sees into Mary's heart, and introduces the strivings and yearnings of her heart as a recurring, poignantly human, and humanizing refrain amid the solemn sweep and cadences of divine events.

Consider Mary in her human-ness. She stands out as an admirable figure against the tension of her own, private drama as she attempts to grasp the overwhelming significance of the events in which she is caught up. Witness, for example, the announcement to her of the angel Gabriel, and her reaction to it, as recorded in Luke I:28-34:

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God.

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and there shall be no end.

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

The young girl Mary is convincing in her reaction to this startling event. The promises made to her are most sweeping and portentous. To anyone raised in the historical and religious traditions of her people, even to a young girl, they must have carried strong resonances. But Mary brushes them aside in going directly to the matter of immediate concern to her: her own purity and the question of the birth. She is ingenuous, in harmony with her years, but her instincts are sound and uncluttered. The words she speaks in submission to the charge laid on her—"Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word"—reflect not so much comprehension as a courageous openness. In the midst of her perplexity, she has the humility to respond to and serve that which she senses to be good, even when the service to be rendered cannot be fully grasped.

Shortly after the annunciation, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Luke tells us that Elizabeth, on seeing Mary, felt the babe jump within her and was filled with the Holy Ghost and bore witness to the divine mission of the child that Mary carried in her womb. But of greater importance to our understanding of Mary is Luke's revelation that Mary herself was touched by the Holy Ghost and spoke her joy and her gratitude with great power. "My soul doth magnify the Lord," she proclaimed,

And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

After telling her own special relationship with God with such depth of prophetic discernment, moreover, her attention turns outward and broadens to magnify and praise the Lord in all His works of justice, love and compassion among men, and particularly in His remembrance of and mercies to Israel. The ingenuous girl of the annunciation here speaks with the voice of a prophet.

But the exalted moment passes into time, and the visit ends, and Mary returns home to wait the time for giving birth. We have all heard and read and sung the events attending on that birth, but let me rehearse briefly with you Luke's account of the arrival at the manger of the shepherds—who had just heard such extraordinary things about this child, all of them in joyous confirmation of the promises made to Mary:

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying that was told them concerning this child.

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

To which he then adds:

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

Sometime later, upon completion of Mary's confinement, she and Joseph brought the child to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice. On entering the temple they found

... a man there whose name was Simeon, and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.

This man Simeon had been promised he would see the Messiah before dying, and after he has taken up and blessed the child, he exclaims:

Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen the salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

This witness was not new to Mary and Joseph but rather a confirmation of what had already been made known to them on earlier occasions, and yet in the following verse there appears the refrain:

And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him.

As though perceiving that thought, Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph also, and then, speaking directly to Mary, he said:

Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;
(Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

Moreover, there was immediately joined to this witness, with its shadow of pain, a supporting one, for there was a prophetess named Anna in the temple in Jerusalem, a woman widowed for some eighty-four years, who never left the temple "but served God with fastings and prayers night and day." This Anna came up to the group in the temple in the very instant in which Simeon blessed Jesus and his parents, and "gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem." With these words echoing in their minds and pushing at their hearts, Joseph and Mary returned with the child to Nazareth, where Jesus, in their care and company, "grew and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him."

That wisdom and grace, which must have been a steady, daily unfolding to his mother, bursts upon us suddenly some twelve years later in Jerusalem, where the family has gone to be taxed. Jesus is found to be missing and is located in the temple in the midst of the doctors only after three anxious days of searching. On finding Him, His

... mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou dealt thus with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.

And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them.

All the manifestations and the witnesses and the years, and they don't quite understand. But there is still the struggle to understand:

And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart.

Now Mary had talked with an angel, had received great promises and assurances from him, had duly conceived and carried a child in a virgin state, had on various occasions heard others testify to the mission and divinity of the child

through the Holy Ghost and had herself prophesied under His influence. And yet, when Jesus is born and as He grows under her care, we see her constantly marvelling and pondering in an unceasing attempt to comprehend His nature and destiny.

What, then, are we to make of Mary's life, she who was so greatly favored and yet seemingly so slow to comprehend? I believe that Don Quixote, that battered but inimitable Christian knight, illuminates her life as well as his own when on one occasion he tells Sancho Panza, his squire, that it is not given him to know the end from the beginning, but only to commit himself to a willing striving within the opaque immediacy of every moment after that ideal which he perceives to merit his loyalty and sacrifice. His work was a work of faith, and his faith a faith of works.

Mary's life manifests this ethic of faith, this intuitive wisdom of love. She had been given to know remarkably much, as we note from the scope of her marvelous sayings on meeting Elizabeth, but she had to grow into an understanding of what she knew—had to flesh it all out with the tissue of her own experience. How was she to reconcile those awesome foretellings with this child she nursed, taught, cared for and watched grow? Yet how could she witness that "increase in wisdom and stature" and not feel her heart resonating to the prophecies? She must have hoped and feared greatly. The essential thing is that she had the initial meekness to respond to the promptings of the Spirit even when she could not grasp their purpose. Through all the years she found the courage to serve in the midst of perplexity and the greatness of heart to love unstintingly in the face of uncertainty, with a love swelling imperceptibly to veneration, for at the marriage of Cana (as John records it) she could turn to the servants of the house and say with simple assurance, "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it." And of this same love and veneration, surely, was forged the sword to pierce her soul, as Simeon had foretold, when she beheld Jesus raised on the cross.

Though as a young girl she gave herself to be "the handmaid of the Lord," it took her a lifetime to complete the transaction. And (need it be said?) this process of living, loving and serving was a more essential and a better teacher by far than had been the angels themselves. Ultimately, of course, it is the only teacher. Angels can announce the gospel to us, but only we can get it into our bones.

Latter-day Saint scripture posits a very real partnership (however unequal it may be) of God and man, rooted in the eternal principles of free agency and man's uncreated being. And Mary, for all that she was "favored of God," demonstrates that human souls do indeed have "the power in them" to reach out for God and to complement and complete His ends.

I find courage and integrity in Mary's response. And, as a Church member, some comfort. For I confess that I often do not know what is meant by "know" when it is used with respect to God and the eternal scheme of things. I confess that there are many things I do not understand about the Gospel and one or two things I find it hard to feel harmonious about in the Church.

There are, on the other hand, many things that I greatly love, appreciate and respond to. On a wholly subjective level, I feel that I have at times been touched and moved by the Spirit of the Lord and I try always to remain mindful of that fact. There are also reasons on a perhaps less subjective level which strongly draw me to love and esteem Jesus Christ. I am grateful for the marvelous lucidity and

coherence of His ethical teachings, and for the consistency with which He embodied them in His life. He speaks, to my mind, more penetratingly and illuminatingly to the noblest potentialities of man than has any other individual that history has recorded. His teachings, life and mission imbue life with an enduring purposiveness that wonderfully mitigates the tragedy of mortality. I love Him, finally, because His claims to divinity are dignified and dignifying and speak powerfully to the deepest hopes and yearnings of my being.

I love and am committed to the Church, to its requirements and activities, because I believe it furthers the work of Christ, that it develops and ennobles men. I appreciate it because it provides me with opportunities for service and growth—for getting outside myself and next to others.

These are the principles and the feelings around which I attempt to build my life, discipline my actions, order my resources and project my aspirations. If I cannot state emphatically and categorically that I “know” them to be *the* truth, I nevertheless hold them to be the finest, truest things I know in life and seek to give my life over to compliance with them, trusting in Christ’s admonition that only through doing the commandments can we learn of their, and His, truth.

And having said all this, and beyond all this, I continually ponder these things in my heart.