

Reflection for September 2021

Theme: The Birthday of our Mother

A little boy sat bored and fidgety as he listened to his Catechism teacher explain to him for the umpteenth time that God loved everyone equally and unconditionally. He thought about how he had received a sound scolding that morning for stealing money from his father's wallet, and he wondered if God loved him then! And so, rolling his eyes to make them look as sincere as he possibly could, he asked the teacher, "Does that mean God loves Satan as much as he loves Mary?"

Stumped, the catechism teacher stared at him in disbelief! She did not know whether she was coming up against genius or heresy! The bell rang, and she hoped for a while that she could bail herself out and buy some time until the next class, but the little boy's gaze was relentless.

And so she sat back in her chair, still holding the little one's gaze, and then out of nowhere, she found herself smiling at him, with love. "Yes! He does love Satan as much as he loves Mary, or you or I. What matters is whether we say "Yes" or "No" to that love. Mary said Yes! Satan said No.

What will your answer be Tim?"

Everyone has a birthday! And while some of us may shy away from the fanfare and attention that birthdays bring, others may recollect memories, good or bad, that birthdays tend to evoke. But the birth of someone will always be one of the greatest miracles of Life. And while Science inches its way forward in every attempt to play God, there are some mysteries of Birth that continue to remain God's exclusive right. And so, it is in the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James* that we find the miraculous birth of Mary, born to ageing and infertile parents. According to this account, Anna and Joachim pray for a child and they receive the promise of an offspring who will advance God's plan of salvation for the world.

As we celebrate the birth of our Mother, let us trace her life and allow her to teach us as only a Mother can.

1. "let it be done unto me" (Lk 1:38)

Mary's entire life, right from her Fiat, to her silent standing by the cross is hinged on obedience. Despite being troubled at what was being asked of her, Mary shows faithfulness. Her questions are not a sign of doubt or unwillingness, but stem from courage, and her 'Yes' changes the course of human history!

Surely her 'Yes' wasn't a fleeting, momentary grace, it was a Yes she had learnt to say faithfully every day, to her parents in obedience, to the Lord in prayer; perhaps it was a daily asking of a "let it be done unto me" in little things, before she gave herself for the Father's Will that the greatest plan of God might be fulfilled.

How easy is it for me to say 'Yes' to my superiors?

Interestingly, the greeting that the angel uses to address our Lady, “Hail, full of grace” or as in Greek “Kaire, kecharitomene” is an extraordinary one and is used for no one else before or after this! The address sounds as if it’s her name, or her title! Interestingly the word *kecharitomene* has no appropriate translation but can loosely be translated into a phrase ‘completely, perfectly, *enduringly* endowed with grace’ which means she was, is, and will always continue to be endowed with perfect grace. The grace is given, not because of the greeting, but has always been bestowed upon her, thus alluding to her Immaculate Conception.

2. “Most blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” (Lk 1:42)

Mary’s visit with Elizabeth is replete with action and gives us the basis for many a dogma and practice. Mary “hurried” to visit her older relative who is also expecting a child as a result of divine intervention. Her greeting to Elizabeth causes a ripple action. The child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy, and Elizabeth is overcome with a sense of unworthiness at having the Mother of the Lord come to meet her! The older feeling unworthy of the younger was uncommon in Jewish culture.

However, this historic visit also throws light on some interesting typologies from the Old Testament. Remember the Ark of the Covenant that the prophet Jeremiah hides (ref 2 Maccabees 2:7) in a cave on Mount Nebo and has been the cause of many unsuccessful treasure hunts? Well, to the heart that seeks, the treasure has long been found and discovered in the person of Mary, the new Ark of the Covenant. The Old Testament Ark of the Covenant contained three items – The Word of God in the form of stone tablets, manna (bread) from Heaven, and the rod of Aaron that resprouted and came back to life (Hebrews 9:4). Just so, the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary contained Jesus Christ – The living Word of God (John 1:1), the Bread of life (John 6:48), and the ruler with a rod of iron who also came back to life (Rev.12:5). In fact, there are many parallels between the mention of the Ark in 2 Samuel 6 and Mary in Luke 1:

- David heads to the hills of Judah (*2 Samuel 6:2-3*);
Mary heads to the hills of Judah (*Luke 1:39*).
- David dances for joy in front of the Ark (*2 Samuel 6:14*);
the unborn foetus John the Baptist leaps for joy in Elizabeth’s womb at the sound of Mary’s voice (*1 Luke 44*).
- David says, “How can the Ark come to me”? (*2 Samuel 6:9*);
Elizabeth says, “How is this that the Mother of my Lord has come to me”? (*1 Luke 43*).
- David and the Ark stayed for 3 months (*2 Samuel 6:11*);
Mary stayed for 3 months (*1 Luke 56*).

As Jesus is “The Word Made Flesh”, Mary is “The Ark Made Flesh”.

3. “a sword will pierce your soul as well” (Lk. 2:35)

What strange words to tell a young mother carrying her infant and yet these words of Simeon give a glimpse of the pain that Mary went through. Jesus as the Christ or Saviour implies that he would not only save his people from their sin, he would also defeat the Enemy, from whom we need to be saved. And that means a fight, a war, suffering, pain- all of which is seen in the Cross. If that is what it implies for Jesus, then what does it imply for Mary, the Mother of our Saviour?

As a poet reminisces, 'Wars are hated by Mothers'. And that couldn't be truer. While mothers glory in the honour received by their children, that glory in no way makes easy the pain, the desolation, the anguish, the suspense, the long, uncertain waiting that a mother feels. It was no different for Mary, who went through the Passion of her Son, not just as an outsider, or onlooker, but in a deeply personal way, like a sword piercing her very heart.

4. "Do whatever he tells you." (Jn 2:5)

Mary is not giving an order; she is imparting her own secret. Learning to do whatever He (God) told her, was something that came as the most natural follow up to *"let thy will be done"*.

Notice, how she is approached by the angel of God, she agrees, and when she approaches the Son of God, who despite it not being his hour, agrees too! Interestingly, making requests and agreeing to them is not a one-way street with God! In God's scheme of things, when we say Yes to His will, he says Yes to us too. "Amen, Amen I say to you, whatever you ask from the Father, He will give it to you in My name". This was not mere boasting on Jesus' part, in fact it was true humility and trust in the Father. Not only did Jesus know that the Father would grant *him* what He asked, but He also believed that *we* would receive what we ask for. However, that trust comes not from asking, but by first learning to do what he tells us, as Mary did, and as Mary teaches us to do.

A Carmelite nun in Baroda, whom I have been blessed to know over the years, would always respond in her characteristic way, to any request of prayer I made, with the words, *"Jesus will do"*. Sometimes, I wished to hear more from her, but perhaps that was all I *needed* to hear. Because true enough, what she would ask of, he would do! Sister's childlike trust perhaps comes from her complete giving of herself to Jesus knowing that we give ourselves to the One who first gave himself to us and when we learn to give of our will, he gives us our desires.

*Would we have the same confidence in God to believe that what we ask for in Jesus' name, we will receive? If not, are there areas in our life we could be holding back from Him?
How easy/ difficult has it been for you to discern and do whatever he asked of you?*

5. "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Mt 12:50)

Often misunderstood, this stand-alone verse is used as a means for Non-Catholic denominations to prove different beliefs, one of them being that- Mary had no special favour with Jesus and is not on any higher level than anyone else.

However, a deeper reading of the text proves that that understanding couldn't be further from the truth. After all, who is the greatest example of doing the will of the heavenly Father, before the birth of Jesus? We all know the obvious answer to that. Mary's 'Yes' makes her not only the first member of this beautiful family called Church that Jesus is instituting, but she is also the Mother of it, as much as she is the Mother of God!

Do we try to do the will of our Heavenly Father? Would Jesus call his brothers and sisters?

6. Standing by the Cross (Jn 19:25)

While burly men may fawn and faint, Mary *stands* by the cross of her Son. She doesn't sit, or recline, she stands firm in the face of extreme torture and agony. And in that, she shows her courage and loyalty. We know we have a Mother who stands with us when we willingly, fearfully, or even begrudgingly take up our daily cross. In giving her to John, He gives a Mother to all of us. Just as Mary was received in Elizabeth's house before the birth of Jesus, she is now received in John's house after the death of Jesus. Later, she is received and assumed into Heaven. And so, Mary deigns to come into every heart and every home that is willing to receive her.

What would our posture be in the face of pain?

How deeply have we received Mary into our lives and communities?

Questions for Reflection-

1. *What special gift would you like to give to Mother Mary on her birthday?*
2. *What one trait/ quality of our Mother would you most want to replicate in your life?*