

MONDAY IN HOLY WEEK - A MEDITATION

Here she is, this girl only just past puberty. What - 14 or 15? She was named Mary by mother and father - often known as Anna and Joachin. Mary was **betrothed** to Joseph.

This humble lass, in the kitchen area of the little home was totally unaware of what was to come. She probably didn't know that she was the subject of many Old Testament prophecies - partly of course, because girls were not put through the more intensive study of the scriptures that the boys of her age were. But this lass, this Mary, was being foreshadowed long before the girl herself was born - a very long time before. The first prophecy referring to Mary is found in the very opening chapters of the Book of Genesis (3:15): ¹⁵ And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel. The prophecy promises a woman, whom we now know to be our Mary, who will be the enemy of the serpent; and besides, the same woman will be victorious over the Devil, at least through her offspring. The completeness of the victory is emphasized by the contextual phrase 'You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life', which is a common old-oriental expression denoting the deepest humiliation.

Isaiah 7: 13 Then Isaiah said, Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. And much more.

Matthew's narrative clarifies this: After narrating the doubt of Joseph and the angel's assurance, "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost", the Evangelist proceeds: "now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spoke by the prophet, saying: Behold a virgin shall be with child, and bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel."

There is a lot of mythology about the fact that Mary's own birth was in some way miraculous, and that she lived in the temple under a vow of purity until her

marriage was arranged. Scholars think that this can safely be discounted.

Jewish girls were considered marriageable at the age of twelve years and six months, though the actual age of the bride varied with circumstances. The marriages were arranged of course - marriage first, love later. The man was usually between 30 - 40. Established, earning, and probably having come into his inheritance. The bride to be on the other hand was young, usually pre-pubescent, so that the wedding could happen only after menstruation had begun and the wife-to-be looked as if she was fertile - or at least ready to conceive. Seems a bit cold blooded to us but that was the way things were. The time between the marriage arrangement and the wedding itself was called the betrothal, after which the bride legally belonged to the bridegroom, though she did not live with him till the marriage was celebrated. Betrothal lasted for a year and was quite as binding as marriage. It could be dissolved only by divorce. Should the man to whom a girl was betrothed die, in the eyes of the law she was a widow. So in the law of time we hear the strange-sounding phrase, "a virgin who is a widow."

When Gabriel had gone, and Mary had sweetly but nervously explain things to Joseph, she went to see cousin Elizabeth. While she was there she sang that amazing revolutionary song, based on Hannah's song of Joy after her prayers were answered - we call it the Magnificat. This is a kind of lyrical song on the blessedness of Mary. In this beautiful song, we see so plainly the paradox of blessedness that was to be in her life. She was granted the blessedness of being the mother of the Son of God. Well might her heart be filled with a wondering, yet frightened joy at so great a privilege. Yet that very blessedness was to be a sword to pierce her heart. It meant that some day she would see her son hanging on a cross.

After Jesus is born, they do what is right in the law and take him to the temple. According to the law ([Exodus 13:2](#)) every firstborn male, both of human beings and of cattle, was sacred to God. That law was a recognition of the gracious power of God in giving human life. Clearly if each first born was offered as an actual sacrifice, normal life would have been hugely disrupted. So there was a symbolic offering in a ceremony called the Redemption of the Firstborn ([Numbers 18:16](#)).

The law and custom was that for the sum of five shekels (approximately 75p) parents could, as it were, buy back their son from God. The sum had to be paid to the priests. Joseph and Mary redeem the child who was to Redeem the world. I find that such a deep and lovely thought - the obedience of these two people fulfilling the law, so that the law could eventually be fulfilled.

And it was at this point that Simeon said to Mary; "This child is chosen by God for the destruction and the salvation of many in Israel. He will be a sign from God which many people will speak against ³⁵and so reveal their secret thoughts. And **sorrow**, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart."

Mary stands close to the foot of the cross. Within earshot of her son - this child whom she bore. The strange one who often got that far away look in his eye. Who liked to wander off alone. Who called God his father, even when Joseph was there. Had Mary told the lad about the strange circumstances of his conception, or was it all still stored up in her heart - to be worried over, and dwelt on almost every day? Wondering - loving - hurting as he gradually grew away from her. He left home and took up with a small crowd of men, and did not see her much more. He had rejected her when he asked: who is my mother and who are my brothers. God how that hurt.

The pain of loss as her Joseph, who gave her other children of course, died. All this is there in her mind as she stands there. She had followed that sad procession. A grizzled old officer, serving in Jerusalem prior to his retirement, carrying a spear and a notice to put on the cross with the bleeding wreck of a man staggering under the weight of the cross beam. There were two others who would also have been bearing their gruesome loads. Three or four other soldiers carrying the ropes and hammer and spikes walked with Jesus. Just another duty for them. Just another day.

But not for Mary, and the others, and John. Mary is being wrung out like a dish cloth. Twisted and twisted again. No wonder we call it the Via Dolorosa, the way of tears. And as the blood runs down his head, caking his eyes, as it drips out of his wrists, and as the slashes in his back open up and ooze, Mary has to stand and

look with longing love through floods of tears. It has all gone wrong. The angel had lied. Nothing like this was supposed to happen - surely. Its my own boy. In awful pain. Dying before my eyes. I want to run away and curl up and wail and wail - but I can't. And a few words to John, only just understandable, so great was the effort. "Look - your mother" and to Mary "Your son". Mary screams inside. I don't want HIM, I want you. I want to hold you and love you and heal these awful wounds. Don't push me away - on to him. Not now.

But the inevitable happens. Jesus dies. In awful strange darkness. And Mary does for him what no mother should have to do - wash him, take the bloody loin cloth off him and put on a shroud. Its my SON. God - O God - WHY? She drags herself away - she doesn't sleep. She crouches down clasping her knees - sobbing - sobbing - sobbing.

Then the unbelievable happens and he was there in the upper room. I think Mary would have been there. The gospel accounts are so skeletal. They don't tell us of the touch and the hug for his mother. The kind words - I TOLD you it would be OK. It would all be over soon.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy spirit had descended on Mary as He came on the Apostles and Disciples gathered together in the upper room at Jerusalem. She was with John - "and from that hour the disciple took her to his own". We think she was with him for the rest of her life.

I believe that Mary was an example and a source of encouragement to the early Christian community both in Jerusalem and in Ephesus where she lived out a further few years. Mary's temporary residence and death in Ephesus are upheld by such contemporary writers as Tillemont , Calmet and others. She had to move of course, because the Jews were trying to expunge any trace of Jesus and the Jesus cult as if it had never been. The man's mother was one of the principal targets. She had to flee the country - she lived in fear the rest of her life. The Jewish secret service was as effective and brutal as it is today.

From a young woman anticipating the joy of marriage which her mother kept on

about - through the joy of bearing Jesus and the other children - to a death in a foreign country. A sword will pierce your soul. The Greek is present continuous - will keep piercing and piercing and piercing - and so it did. To be chosen by God so often means at one and the same time a crown of joy and cross of sorrow. The piercing truth is that God does not choose us for ease and comfort and personal selfish joy. No God calls us out for a task that will take *all* that head and heart and hand can bring to it.

God chooses a man or a woman in order to use them.

When Joan of Arc knew that her time was short she prayed, "I shall only last a year; use me as you can." When we come to terms with this truth, the sorrows and hardships that serving God may bring are not matters for lamentation; they are our glory, for all is suffered for God.

Let us pray that we can be as open to God as was the young Mary, as faithful to God even in the midst of personal pain, as trusting and as loving to the end of our lives, be they bitter or sweet. If we can do even a part of that, our lives will be rich indeed.