



MARY, MOTHER OF THE WORD

One of the main elements in the training of psychotherapists is the practice of infant observation. The therapist-in-training spends some time each week very closely watching the interaction between a mother and her newborn child, attentive to the responses and the development taking place in the child. In recent times, we have understood much more deeply how a child's physical development depends on this early interaction. Even sensory development, such as the sense of hearing, is awakened, it seems, more by touch than by anything else. It has long been the insight of psychology that the early patterns of interaction between mother and child will stay with the child right through into adulthood.

Perhaps the key word that comes to our own minds when we reflect on our own observations of motherhood is 'nurturing.' A mother nurtures her child. We look to be nurtured by our mothers, and are scarred when that nurturing has been inadequate or interrupted. The maternal instinct is to nurture, to nourish the life entrusted to her, to enable that life to grow and develop, to tend to its well-being and care. Motherhood brings forth life: life from life. This is as much an emotional mystery as it is a physical one. How many times do we hear of - or if we are a mother, experience - the agony and the delight of motherhood even in regard to children who are now forty or fifty years old! Motherhood is not given for a brief period. Rather motherhood is a mystery into eternity.

As true as this might be in the mystery of ourselves, it is also true in the mystery of God's life in our midst. That divine life in our midst requires constant mothering. Thus, we talk also of Mary, as Mother of God. In nurturing the life of Jesus, Mary, at the same time, generates God's own life. As she tends to the human life of Jesus she brings the divine life forth as well. She enables both the divine and the human life with growth and development; she enables that life to become fully itself. In bringing forth the divine life into the world, Mary nurtures that life. In this sense, she is most deeply and truly the mother of God.

Even more wondrously, though, through the mystery of our baptism, we, like Mary, also carry Jesus within us. The life of God has been conceived in us, spiritually, as it was physically in her. Through our baptism, the life of Jesus is entrusted to us to nurture, to nourish, to mother. Thus, with Mary we too participate in this mystery of generating the life of God. With Mary, each of us has become mothers of God. God asks each of us to mother the divine life which has been entrusted to each and every one of us. Mary thus becomes the paradigm for us, the model for us. That is why her memory has such importance for us.

Mary is the one who listens and receives the Word deep within herself. She nourishes this Word so unique and so personal, so enfleshed within her flesh, and she brings this Word to birth. Mary nurtures this Word in ways which are ordinary and with undramatic generosity. Her own life is not remembered for any gesture independent of the care of this Word. Vigilance for the Word entrusted to her constitutes her mission, her vocation in life.

Through the waters of baptism we too are impregnated with the Word which we are commissioned to bring to life, to nurture and to cultivate. At the Easter Vigil each year we symbolise this ritually when we plunge the Easter Light into the Waters: the light of Jesus Christ gives life to the waters of our own chaos and barrenness. Through baptism the life of Jesus lives in us: we carry that divine seed within each of our own bodies. In the example of Mary, we too are called to mother this life so that it may reach its maturity. Mary models this motherhood for us. This motherhood which, in this sense, is the vocation of each of us begins through our fundamental receptivity to the Word of God.

This means regular contact with the Scriptures, our people's memory of the action of God in their midst. This contact is given us every day through our own personal reading of scriptural texts, texts which need to be read very slowly and meditatively which we have seen in our last talk. Our reception of the Word is also facilitated by our participation in the Church's liturgy. It is in Eucharist, where the activity of God is remembered and celebrated together in such way as to lead to the celebration of the fullness of God's love for us, that we are particularly called to receive the Word. Our openness to hear the Word of God in these settings, to be deeply touched, affected and changed by it, will then over time make us more alert to the Word as it is spoken to us in many, many different ways through the course of a day: through the chance comment of a stranger, the considered statement of a friend, the events of our world, the movements of our own hearts. Like the Israelites of old, we are called to eat this Word: to digest it and make it part of our very own selves, recognising the adage that "we become what we eat."

Like Mary, we are first and foremost receptive to the Word. But the Word is actually conceived in us, as it was in Mary, in that place of paradox in our life. Mary is the Virgin Mother of the Word. This is a great paradox: the place of emptiness becomes the place of fullness, the place of death becomes a place of life, and the place of barrenness becomes the place of abundance. Mary's virginity is not so much a statement of her morality, as it is statement of the place within her in which she both hurts and hopes at the same time. Where is that place deep inside us? For, spiritually speaking, this is where our womb is. And it is into this place, this womb, that we receive the divine life. Not just where we hope, not just where we hurt, but in the place where we hurt and hope together - the place of paradox in our selves. The Word of God seeks this place out: it requires this environment in order to live and breathe and grow. It will be the place we will be led to often in our openness to the Word. However in our fidelity to nurturing the Word in this place we will come to know the truth that God is indeed with us, for us, Emmanuel.

Mary listens for the Word, she receives it deeply within herself and she brings that Word into its own life: flesh of her flesh. Its life is nurtured by that self transcending love that so marked her life, as it is in our own life through our own service of and to each other, that way in which we truly and deeply respect each other with such personal care.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, nine centuries ago, wrote a lovely prayer which expresses the divine motherhood that we are all called into through the example of Mary:

“May the Word who in the beginning was with God, become flesh of my flesh, according to your word. I beg that the Word be to me not a word which once pronounced fades away, but which conceived remains, clothed with flesh and not with air. Let it be to me, a Word not only audible to the ear, but visible to the eyes, one which hands can touch and arms carry. And let it not be to me a written word and mute, but one incarnate and living, that is to say, not a word scratched by dumb sign on dead skins, but one in human form truly graven, lively, within my chaste womb, not by the tracings of a dead pen, but by the workings of the Holy Spirit. Let it be to me as it has never been to any person before me and will be to no one after me. For in many and various ways God has spoken of old to our fathers by the prophets, and it is known that the word of the Lord was put into the ear of some, into the mouth of others and even into the hand of a few. But I ask that it be to me in my womb according to your word. I do not want it be a word proclaimed to be in discourse, symbolised in figures or dreamed in the imagination, but one silently

inspired, personally incarnate, corporally inviscerate. May the Word which could not, and had no need to be, made in him, deign to be in me, deign to be to me according to your Word. Let it be for the whole world, but let it be to me uniquely according to your Word.”

In the example and through the intercession of Mary, may we mother the Word we receive. May it be conceived deep within us, so that, giving birth to the life of God, we might come to perfection, reaching maturity and sharing the fullness of Christ. (cf. Eph. 4:13). May the divine life never ceased to be birthed within us.

Father David Ranson
Academic Secretary
Senior Lecturer in Spirituality
Catholic Institute of Sydney