

An Endless Cycle Broken: The Gift of Mary to the World

Often I find myself in strange places. A couple of years ago I find myself in a women's refuge. A young unmarried mother came in with a child perhaps no more than two years of age. The mother couldn't have been more than sixteen and she was clearly distressed. It was quite obvious the child was an enormous imposition and she forced the child onto the group I was talking with. There was every sense that, at least for a half hour or so, she had abandoned the child to us. I am sure she would have liked to have left the centre without the child. The child, of course, knew all this. He himself was not very happy and was quite distressed. Holding the child, one didn't have to be particularly insightful to realise that indeed he was destined to repeat the cycle of his mother. Forced to carry his mother's emotional and social agenda, he was destined for the streets like her. It would only be a matter of time before he too was seeking a refuge. What ever innate potential and talent he might naturally have was destined to be at least inhibited and at worst distorted.

For me, the experience was a stark confrontation with what has become termed in the Christian tradition as "original sin:" the reality that we are born into a flawed situation which repeats itself from generation to generation. This flawed situation prevents us from achieving the full stature of our humanity in any automatic way. Life must undergo a constant series of transformations in order for maturity and wholeness to be experienced. Even so, there is no guarantee that those transformations will be complete, or successful. Or that they will even occur in the first place. There is no surety that we will achieve in our life that for which we were created.

In the memory of Mary, however, we dare to assert that God has so acted to enable one of us to surely achieve that for which she was created. The delicate balance between grace and free will has resolved itself in the life of this person. One of us has been freed to become fully who she was created to be. The inhibitions and distortions of the flawed situation into which we are all born have lost their power. Something stronger, more beautiful, is at work.

We assert that Mary enters the world free of original sin. We must be precise, though, in our definition of such sinlessness so that Mary is not spiritualised into some form of invulnerable passionlessness. We must retrieve the scriptural sense of sin which was not about the presence of differing or contradictory feelings and impulses. When talking of sin, scripture rather uses the word which literally means 'to miss the mark,' to be "wide of the target." It has its origins in archery: an arrow either hits or misses the target. Mary is sinless not because she never felt angry, or because she was never impatient or irritated, or because she never needed to struggle. She is preserved in her sinlessness because she never missed the point of her life, because she enjoyed a freedom to become fully the person God created her to be.

The cycle of endless repetition of limitation and distortion has been broken. Because it has been broken in this one person, humanity is no longer the same. We are no longer the same. We are gifted with the recognition and with a hope that begins to change our perspective on life. We are not simply on a treadmill. The ancient Promethean dilemma has been resolved. We are not pushing a huge boulder to the top of a hill only to discover it has rolled back down waiting us to push it up again. And so forth. Our efforts, our initiatives, our intentions are not engaged simply to be overwhelmed by a vacuum of simply repeated cycles. Of course, we may not see the full result of all that we do. We are not preserved from making mistakes and from taking unhelpful detours, but we go on in the confidence that somehow, somewhere what we do is making a difference, that true change is possible, and that the transformation of the world is not a fantasy but indeed a reality that is possible to hope in.

The freedom to have this hope is born in our mindfulness of how God has gifted the world with Mary, she who believed the promised made her would be fulfilled and who brought to life the Hope of the world itself.

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