

SERMON FOR ADVENT 4 | 18.12.2016

In early June Maria and I took the family to Ireland to meet some of our relatives still living there – and the graveyards of a few who had now passed on. One of our journeys took us to the north of Co Cork and the town of Charleville. It is a classic Irish hub with one long and imposing main street, with the Church at one end and the graveyard at the other. It is where Maria's father was brought up in the 1930s and 40's before he emigrated to London.

The Church itself is set above a great flight of steps, a huge and imposing building made of grey stone like so many built in Ireland at the turn of the 19th/20th century. And inside, to the left of the main altar, is a statue of Mary the Mother of Jesus. It must be ten feet tall with her head surrounded by an electric fluorescent halo giving off a slightly weird blue light! And in front, when we were there, a whole bank of candles radiating an extraordinary amount of heat.

And as I sat there I wondered, as I wonder now: why was this part of the Church so popular? What kind of person did the members of that parish think Mary was like?

This week as we come so close to the birth of Jesus at Christmas, when the words of John the Baptist over the last couple of weeks have been ringing in our ears *prepare the way of the Lord*, what was Jesus mother Mary actually like?

Can I suggest that she was anything but the plaster saint I saw in Ireland! Of all people, she was extraordinarily 'alive' – alive with all six senses, as the Gospel record is at pains to share with us. She has more stories told about her than anyone in the Gospels – apart of course from Jesus himself. What she heard, saw, tasted, smelt, touched and perceived, all add up to an amazingly clear-sighted and powerful person – the kind of person who could carry through the words of the psalm-like manifesto we commonly call the Magnificat – even if they are not actually her words!

So what did she hear, see, taste, smell, touch - and perceive?

Mary's story starts, of course, with the message of an angel about her role in bearing the Son of God. But it didn't end there. Her life was full of the words of Jesus too, even some which were pretty curt and hurtful – as when she turns up when he is 12 and teaching in the Temple; or when he is doing a seminar in someone's house and there is not room inside for her and her other children to make contact with him; or at Cana when she pushes him to turn water into wine. She hears too the unkind remarks of those around her: the words of her neighbours when she is unexpectedly pregnant, the words of the innkeepers when there is no room in Bethlehem. She has to respond to Joseph's uncertainties and be ready to cope with the disciples when they, too, began to lose their nerve at various times in Jesus' ministry. Then the words of Jesus to her after the Resurrection, bringing her the final comfort she longed for...

And what did she see? The long journeys from Nazareth to Bethlehem when she was pregnant, the merciless killings of the innocent babies as they fled to Egypt, and worst of all the sight of seeing her son being led to execution, his death and burial – but also, wonderfully his ascension into heaven with the rest of the disciples – the promise fulfilled.

And was she not able to taste the wine of celebration at the wedding in Cana, and probably the various forms of food and drink distributed by Jesus at the last Supper too? They were family affairs after all and while she may be ironed out of the accounts by male writers, that doesn't mean she wasn't there – as she may well have been there at Pentecost when the Spirit fell on the disciples gathered together after the Ascension.

And most of us know the importance of smell – not just of lovely or distasteful things – but also the smell of success ... and the smell of fear: the smell of an empty home after she was widowed, the smell of a vacant house after Jesus left her to begin his three years as a wandering preacher.

Every mother knows the vital importance of touch too: when to touch and when not to. The child in her lap; but also the broken and dead body of the executed Son on Good Friday. What Jesus gave to a few individuals as a gift – to Mary Magdalene in the Easter garden, to Veronica on the way to Calvary, his mother Mary enjoyed as of right.

And the sixth sense: the sense of intuition which we all understand but cannot prove, alluded to in the Gospels in that short and simple phrase: *and Mary pondered all these things in her heart.*

This last sense, intuition, the power of perception is, in some ways the most interesting and fruitful of the six senses. It is the stuff of religious people because in so many ways it is at the heart of the ‘faith of the saints’ as St Paul describes us in the 2nd reading. We, who have been called to follow Christ are called to do more than put two and two together. We are invited to share the mind of God and to see things that others cannot – or will not see.

That is why the Church has said or sung the Magnificat (which we have used between the first and second readings this morning) as part of its evening prayer every day of every year for over a thousand years. I called it a Manifesto earlier on and so it is: it is the call to action of a people who know themselves to be at the bottom of the heap in world order terms, and yet who still have enough faith and self-belief to know that God will overcome all those who have set themselves up in power. In Mary’s Song it is they who will crash to the ground not those who currently have so little. In the words of Anne Carter’s paraphrase: *For those who love your holy name your mercy will not die. Your strong right arm puts down the proud – and lifts the lowly high.*

Mary, the Mother of God: Mary the one fully and truly alive, the one who used all her senses to understand what God was about – hidden though so much of it appeared to be.

And the legacy of her Manifesto lives on. It lives in politicians like Aung San Suu Kyi who is revered as ‘Mother Suu Kyi’ in her home state of Burma for the way she endured so much before becoming the effective head of government; it can be seen in Michelle Obama for her pioneering work, not least here in London where, on more than one visit to Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School in Islington, she picked out the more disadvantaged girls for special attention.

But of course Mary’s strengths are not gender specific. They are the gifts of all those who use their senses to the utmost so that they can hear, see, taste, smell, touch and feel the word of God and seek to do his will – come what may. After all it is the way of Jesus himself and the reason why we use these words in the Advent Affirmation of faith: *Though he was divine, Jesus did not cling to equality with God but made himself nothing. Taking the form of a slave, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has raised him on high and given him the name above every name...*

We honour Mary today not just because of what God was able to do through her but for what she then did: Anne Carter’s paraphrase of the Magnificat again:

***My soul proclaims you, mighty God,
my Spirit sings your praise.
You look on me, you lift me up,
and gladness fills my days.***

***All nations now will share my joy;
your gifts you have outpoured.
Your little ones you have made great,
the weak you have restored.***

***You fill the hungry with good things,
the rich you send away.
The promise made to Abraham
will last to endless days.***

Forget the cold neon light around the head of that statue in Charleville and celebrate with all those who lit candles, the wonderful warmth – and intuition - of Mary the mother of God