

When you go home again, have a look around your house for any 2 and 3D images that depict Mary the Virgin. When I looked in the Rectory, I found at least three; this Orthodox painted icon of a rather sad-looking Madonna and child; this beautifully carved olive-wood sculpture I brought back from the Holy Land and a fragile porcelain heirloom of a blue-veiled Mary who displays the infant Jesus with his little arms outstretched, crucifix-style. (I've not brought her with me in case I got clumsy and dropped her!) All of these representations are quite lovely in their own way but they also present a demure, rather submissive, well-to-do figure of Mary. And these are by no means unique. Visit any art gallery worth its salt and you're bound to find at least one canvas in Mary features. But it's more than likely that she'll be the backdrop to the main 'Messiah' event.

Unless you've worshiped in a 'High' Anglican Church in which Mary is solemnly honoured at nearly every service, the Mother of our Lord makes her scant annual appearances in the Nativity and perhaps at the foot of Calvary's cross. Despite her Song, the Magnificat, being rehearsed every day at Evensong across the Globe, its enduring significance as a litany of defiance, equality and freedom is seldom acknowledged. As we keep her own special Feast Day today, let's lend Mary the Virgin a level of respect she so richly deserves.

Theologians across the ages (most of whom have been men) have written a very great deal about Mary, some of which is Scripturally based but mostly layered over and underpinning established Church Tradition. The Catholic Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is one such example:

*'the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, has been, by a special grace and privilege of Almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, preserved and exempted from every stain of original sin . . .'*

Surrounded as we are by images like the ones I mentioned earlier, it's hard for us to imagine Mary other than a slim, pale, perfect slip of a girl and yet, at the end of Paul Borgman's poem, that intimately imagines Christ's birth in a stable, he writes this:

(Last stanza of poem p. 519)

The rise of Feminist theology (most of which has been written by women) has been understandably critical, to the point of scathing, of the way in which Mary's God-given womanhood has been artificially elevated to a level of perfection that no-one else in Creation can ever attain. Here are just a few of many such examples:

'There is a fierceness, even a touch of Deborah, mixed with the sweetness in the Magnificat to which most painted Madonnas do little justice; matching the frequent severity of His own sayings. I am sure that the private life of the holy family was, in many senses, 'mild' and 'gentle', but perhaps hardly in the way some hymn writers have in mind. One may suspect, on proper occasions, a certain astringency; and all in what people at Jerusalem regarded as a rough north-country accent.' (C.S. Lewis, *Reflection on the Psalms*)

Mary is seen as a sharing woman seeking out Elizabeth to tell the news of her pregnancy; as being in the tradition of prophecy; neglected by her son in favour of his mission; and as a disciple journeying in partnership with Jesus along with other women and men. 'Then we witness her profound grief at the death of her child under the judgement of religious and political powers, her faithfulness to follow him to the tomb, and the divine gift bestowed upon her to be a witness of the resurrection of the "flesh of her flesh, the bone of her bone".' (Constance Parvey, WCC, Sheffield 1981)

'Here is no model of submission and subordination, but someone fully living out her partnership with God in the Christ event.' (Ann Loades)

To be honest, Mary's gynaecological state isn't that important to my faith. That's something between God and her – thankfully I sense that sex isn't considered as sinful as it once was! What makes this feast special to me comes from this young girl's maturity and willingness to risk everything (social status, domestic security, the suffering of divine motherhood) so that God's ancient covenant with Israel could be exchanged for a new and wondrous reality. The prophet Ezekiel once uttered these words:

'I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'

Mary was the lynchpin to make this happen. That is her saintly legacy for which we rightly give worship-filled thanks to God today.