

GOSPEL SEEDS

DECEMBER, 2005

Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation

THE UNIVERSAL GRACES OF BIRTH & MOTHERHOOD

Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman, robed with the sun, standing on the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant, and in labour, crying aloud in the pangs of childbirth.

(Rev 12:1-2. See also whole text from Rev 11:19 - Rev 12:17)

Who then is this pregnant woman? Is she a sign, symbol or representative of something or someone? Israel, Mary or the Church are the usual suggestions. Well, though I will not argue the case in detail here, I would say all three! Placed in the Book of Revelation, is it about fulfilment and events in the past, present or future? Again, I would say all three! (Again, I will presume and draw on this position rather than demonstrate it fully here.) Does it have a connection with Advent? Advent is about the coming of the Lord. We have the coming of the Lord at the end of time; his coming to us here and now in grace; his coming in history in Bethlehem, fulfilling his promises to Israel and his frequent visitations throughout their history. Clearly this already weaves together the past, present and future, and Israel, Mary and the Church! Let us explore further ...

The Birthing and Blooming of Life at the Lord's Coming

God is full of life and his coming – the making manifest of his presence – brings life (though it also consumes that which would choke life). His visitation, his touch, gives life, starts life, stirs up life, brings it forth. Frequently in the Old Testament this is expressed as the earth breaking into flower and budding with life, and as creation giving birth and teaming with life. Isaiah is full of such imagery (e.g. 35:1,2,6,7) and the psalms and others take it up too. For Paul, the 'whole of creation has been groaning in labour pains until this time (Rom 8:22). He makes it clear that birth has now begun! All of creation is like a woman giving birth - 'mother earth' at least in some sense. But not as a single mother or of her own accord. She is in covenant relationship with God as husband.

This covenant with creation goes right back to the beginning – to God's creation. All of life was to be blessed and to multiply. And Adam and Eve were to be at its centre, fruitful themselves and also the guardians of the life and fruitfulness of the planet. (Adam names the woman Eve, literally 'the mother of all those who live' (Gen 3:20).) But life comes from God ultimately which means Adam and Eve are called to look to him, to align themselves with Him, to be obedient to him. Yet they don't! They are seduced by Satan and death enters the world. God does not give up and makes his first promise of deliverance with a new beginning and a new Messiah. 'I shall put enmity between you (Satan) and the woman, between your offspring and hers; it will bruise your head and you shall strike its heel (Gen 3:15).' Yet now things will be difficult for men and women, even childbirth will be difficult (Gen 3: 16-19). The same can be said for God's attempts to bring us to spiritual birth and to birth the potential and destiny of all creation.

Mary - Daughter of Israel, Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church

The Genesis account carries profound religious truth, whether or not we regard it as historically accurate. The same figures – a man, a woman and Satan, come up again in Revelation 12. Here they carry religious truth and multiple levels of meaning but here they also point to clear individuals: Satan, Jesus and Mary. Within the New Testament texts, Jesus

is called the New and Last Adam. Not long after they were written, Christian writers began describing Mary as the New Eve. This is already implied in the New Testament. In John's Gospel, Mary is addressed by the title "woman" – not the gesture of a rude son but a reference to her link with the first person in Scriptures to be described thus: Eve (Jn Ch 2 & 19). (Cf Gal 4:4?)

Christ is the New Adam because he is the head of a New Humanity and new Creation. He is this because he was obedient to the Father even unto death. Mary was obedient too: Her words, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word (Lk 1: 38) make the Incarnation possible. (In this Mary represents the people of Israel and is the daughter of Zion.) Eve and Adam were disobedient and gave birth according to the flesh, death entering the world. Mary and Jesus were obedient, giving birth according to the spirit, life eternal springing forth. Certainly Christ is Divine – and Mary only a creature and, with us, saved by the grace of Christ. Indeed, Mary could only have said "yes" to God with the powerful Grace of Christ, yet God has always looked for human co-operation in fulfilling his plans. Eve disobeyed first and then was involved in tempting Adam to disobey. As he is the head of our race we share in his fall. Likewise, Mary obeyed first and co-operatively followed and stayed with Christ. Obedient to death, he was raised up as head of a Humanity into whose Divine life and grace we are born from above through water and the Spirit (Jn 3:5). Mary became a spiritual mother at the foot of the cross, giving motherly care thereafter to John and also other disciples. For those Christians with a significant sense of the Communion of Saints and our unity with the church in Heaven (cf Rev 12:1-2) that maternal care and intercession continues. Mother of Christ, Mary is mother of the church, his body - yet also a member of it. How can a person be mother of the head of someone and not too be mother of his body?

Jesus and the Church: the Birthing and Mothering of Christians

In a sense Christ too gave birth to us, the church, on the cross (though not in normal way a woman does but in a unique way like Adam 'giving birth' to Eve when there was till that point no separation of male and female). Blood and water flowed from his side – and these flow in childbirth. A pregnant woman feeds her child from her own body and a new mother feeds her baby with milk, again coming from her body. Christ feeds us with his body and blood, in faith and under the form of bread and wine. What is born is in his likeness and life: it is 'flesh of his flesh' - his very body. Christ cares for us and nurtures us like a mother. Christ, like Adam before, has the fullness of life of the new humanity. Life is taken from Adam's side to make Eve, a companion and bride for him. This clarifies and affirms his maleness and makes her feminine, taken from him, receiving life and also then nurturing it. Likewise with Christ. He has fullness of life, which taken from his side creates the church – a companion and wife for him, able to receive and nurture life. As Eve is feminine and is called Mother, so is the Church. The church nurtures divine life in us, flowing from Christ the Divine head. The church suckles us like a mother (cf Isaiah 66: 7-13). As St Augustine says: "You cannot have God for your Father unless you also have the Church for your Mother."

Mary is associated with this work, mainly by love and prayer. Paul too picks up on this role he has as mother as well as father. 'Like a mother feeding and looking after her children, we felt so devoted to you that we would have been happy to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, so dear had you become. (1 Thes 2:7-8.)' Male or female, let us commit our very lives to bringing Christ to birth and maturity in others, sharing in the motherly work which Christ has given us as his church, labouring until Christ should come again and bring his work fully to birth.

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