

I want to talk about the Lord's Mother, the young Jewish girl who said *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word*. When I was a boy, not much was made of Mary in our house. My parents, not being religious, sent my sister and me every Sunday, three times a day, to the Methodist chapel across the road. They were, as I say, not religious themselves. In fact they were practical atheists. But my God they were Protestant atheists!

They were among that great number of hardworking puritans in Armley who detested the local parish church of St Bartholomew – a magnificent 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic building which loomed over the whole parish like a Victorian grandparent. They didn't like the fact that the men who worked there wore cassocks and called themselves priests. They didn't like the newsletter which invited Armley householders to Mass. And they had only so much as to hear mention of the Blessed Virgin and they thought instantly of the Scarlet Woman.

When I was thirteen I read Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian*. I chucked the chapel and its frosty deacons and became an atheist too. So what to do on a Sunday morning? I took to going to visit my grandmother who taught me to play whist and encouraged me to learn the piano in her front room – a room kept almost solely for funeral teas: with that piano and its yellowing keys, an aspidistra which had seen better days; and the solipsistic ticking of an unwatched clock.

One morning when I was there, struggling over Mozart's so called *simple* sonata in C, I suddenly heard a great commotion from the street. I looked out and there was a procession from the Roman Catholic church. The priests in lace and birettas. Pretty young girls in white dresses. Old ladies with veils. A brass band as good as the Sally Ann. And this haunting refrain *Ave... Ave*. It was my first taste of real religion and it made Bertrand Russell seem quite irrelevant as *the heart has its reasons which reason knows not of*.

The Catholic kids seemed to have a better time of it. It was the same years later when I was ordained and working as a curate at the parish church of St Mary's in Oldham. Lancashire is much more Catholic than Yorkshire and processions in Oldham were like the buses: miss one and there would be three more along in a minute. So something had to be done for the Protestant kids. And something was done. In place of homage to Mary there was Rose Queen Day every Maytime. After much backbiting and rancour among their mothers, a little girl would be chosen and dressed up as Rose Queen and there would be a street party, a sort of Protestant hymn-sandwich in the open air and a procession. A colourful slice of mill town paganism.

I wonder why there exists this coolness among Protestants towards the Blessed Virgin? If you read the great Catholic theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas and St Augustine, you will find Our Lady is revered and honoured. If you read the best English poets Donne and George Herbert you will find adoring verses about her. But I've discovered you don't have to look far for the love of her expressed by non-Roman Catholics and I'll come to that in a minute.

Part of the suspicion of devotion to Mary is an English distaste for public displays of emotion. True sentiment is often mistaken for mere sentimentality. And there is perhaps a more insidious fear – the fear of femininity. But still I'm puzzled over Protestants' hesitation in coming to Mary. For Protestants love the Bible, and she is after all the most important character in the Bible after Our Lord himself. Unique. And just how extraordinary she is, think on this. She is the person physically and intimately related to the Holy Ghost. Think back to the creation where it says, *And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*

This is the same Spirit – God himself – who formed his own Person in the body of this little Jewish girl. The Spirit of God moving on the face of the waters. And again Mary is *Stella Maris, the Star of the Sea*. She is the first creature in the new creation. She wears a blue dress because she is the Earthly Mother clothed in the colour of the Sky Father. Her body housed the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity by the will of the First Person and the operation of the Third Person of that Most Holy Trinity. She is the receptacle of the Incarnation. God is Spirit. She is matter. She is matter and Mater

Well, I'm not going to quote any of the great Catholic theologians today. I'm going to look at what some distinguished Anglicans and Protestants have said about Mary. Let's start near home with Eric Mascall who worked as a priest here in the City. Mascall says, *The relation of Mary to the Church is the relative product of two more fundamental relations. The first of these is Mary's relation to her Son: he is still Man and she is still his Mother. The second is his relation to us and to the Church: we are his members and the Church is his Body. Therefore Mary is our Mother and we are her children by adoption into her Son. This is not an exuberance of devotion but a fact of theology.*

Then there is the Protestant evangelical John de Satge who, against the view that Catholics have taken liberties with Scripture and greatly exaggerated Mary's importance. He says: *Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics have added on to the Scriptural deposit not a distortion from it but what is congruent with Scripture as a legitimate extension.*

Or here's the Methodist Neville Ward: *The birth and infancy narratives, which date from the very first Christian century, are seen as a paean of praise to God and to Mary for Jesus. Ever since then, there has poured through the life of the Christian Church an amazing flood of gratitude and love for her whose existence was the slender thread on which for believers hangs so much of life's joy and meaning*

Or Donald Dawe, Presbyterian: *Mary in her femininity expresses those dimensions of faith that have been lost in a male-dominated piety. So we join in saying "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus". Where this mystery is no longer contemplated, faith in her Son wanes.*

Finally Martin Luther himself: *Mary is God's workshop and as the mother of God she is raised above the whole of humankind and has no equal.*

May I end with some lines I wrote about the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption into heaven?

*The fields are all rust after the spring rain,  
And the sky descends heavily, compressing the light  
In which only the early insects are at home,  
Silent, moist, flickering towards nightfall.  
Should not spring be Our Lady's season,  
The Assumption of Mary  
In April's bright showers  
All that blue, rainbows and new lambs;  
Sharp shadows rushing across the limestone?  
In the courts of heaven it was put to Our Lady,  
This matter of her Feast Day.  
She said, "No, not that cold spring  
With its bright nails,  
Love lifted up against the cruel sky:  
Give me Our Father's harvest ripening,  
And grace descending in the August rain,  
Even as I rise"*