

Yesterday was the Feast of the Annunciation and today is Mothering Sunday, so I should like to say a few words about the Blessed Virgin Mary. First, I have much sympathy with the Protestants, for they are often misrepresented as having no respect for the Mother of God. G.K. Chesterton said, *Protestants can't see a flash of blue cloak without thinking of the scarlet woman*. But listen to this:

She is the highest woman and the noblest gem in Christianity after Christ. She is nobility, wisdom and holiness personified. We can never honour her enough...No woman is like her. She is blessed above all wisdom and sanctity

Those words of love and devotion are by Martin Luther. And how about this:

God esteemed Mary above all creatures, including the saints and the angels. I believe with all my heart that this pure Virgin bore for us the Son of God and that she remained in the birth and after it a pure virgin for eternity.

That is by Zwingli himself. And then the extreme Protestant English reformer Hugh Latimer, burnt at the stake by Queen Mary in 1555, said:

As the saffron bag that hath been full of saffron doth ever after savour and smell of the sweet saffron it contained, so Our Blessed Lady which conceived and bare Christ in her womb did ever resemble the manners and virtues of that precious babe.

And so the church and we today turn to Mary with love and honour because she is the closest person to Our Lord. And the very heart and centre of the gospel comes from Mary. Well, she didn't actually write any of the Bible, but there are intimate incidents concerning Jesus that only she could know.

When she was alone and the angel appeared who else but Mary knew what her question to him was: *How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?* This was a little girl – probably fourteen or fifteen years old, consorting with terrifying visions. Gabriel was no fairy. She would not have had her blue gown in renaissance lapis lazuli in those days. She was a poor girl from Nazareth. How do we know? From Mary herself in the touching words in which she describes how she made the poor person's offering at the presentation of Jesus in the temple: *a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons*

Mary not only bore the Son of God in her body. (I speak as a fool!) But she bore in her soul from being a little girl the knowledge of his terrible destiny. Again we have the personal, intimate recollection of the awful prophecy:

Yea a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also.

Then there is the raw confrontation with the twelve year old Christ-child when he went missing for three days in Jerusalem:

Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.

The first miracle at Cana in Galilee is done at Mary's request: *They have no wine!*

Now is there a more heartbreaking scene in the whole gospel than this:

Stabat Mater dolorosa...Now there stood by the Cross of Jesus his Mother. When Jesus therefore saw his Mother and the disciple standing by whom he loved, he saith unto his Mother, Woman behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother. And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.

Now that most severely intellectual Christian, Blaise Pascal, his mind constantly afire with the logic of God, said we may turn to Mary in our hearts – *for the heart hath reasons which reason knows not of*. Mary is the sublimest, tenderest creature. That is why Christians have gone to her as Mother. This is why there are countless shrines throughout the world and the indescribably beautiful pictures by the master painters.

But she was tough. You would have to be tough to endure her sufferings. And Christians have always prayed to her for triumph in battle. The rosary is not a pretty toy. It was given in a vision to St Dominic as a weapon of war against the Albigensian heresy – which threatened to destroy the Church.

In 1571 Don John of Austria marshalled his ships against the Muslim threat at Lepanto in Mary's name. Listen to these words from another Protestant, the historian of the Reformation Diarmaid MacCulloch:

The Christian success at Lepanto was attributed to Mary's intercession with God by the faithful praying the rosary and 7th October was declared the Feast of Our Lady of Victory. There had been Protestants too on the galleys which sailed to Lepanto – doing what Christian noblemen were traditionally supposed to do – defend the faith in battles against infidels. And far away in Scotland, the young Protestant King James VI wrote an epic poem celebrating Don John's victory in the battle.

Closer to our own time, the Polish people put their trust in the Blessed Virgin to defend them against first the Nazis and then the Soviets. They had their shrine of the Bright Mountain at Czestochowa. The Polish Pope John Paul II in his memoirs says:

The shrine of the bright Mountain became a bastion of faith, spirit and culture and all that constitutes national identity. And then later a national pilgrimage set off from Czestochowa. The communist authorities did everything in their power to stop it. When the icon of the Virgin was arrested by the police, the pilgrimage continued with the empty frame and the message became even more eloquent...

No, the Lady who stood watching her young Son's crucifixion would not be fazed by innumerable commissars.

Our Lady does not belong only to a Catholic cult. As I said at the start, she is revered already in the gospels. We have heard of Luther's, Zwingli's and Latimer's devotion to her. Mary belongs to all Christians. So we need not be shy about approaching her, asking for her comfort and help when we are in trouble and distress – particularly when we are most fretful, anxious, afraid.

Think, *for those in peril on the sea*. She is *Stella Maris, Star of the Sea*, and the Patron Saint of all sailors. And of course, the raging waves and the shipwreck are images of all we fear, of chaos and being cast away. So I end with part of Mr Eliot's beautiful poem. This is for all of us:

*Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory,
Pray for all those who are in ships, those
Whose business has to do with fish, and
Those concerned with every lawful traffic
And those who conduct them.*

*Repeat a prayer also on behalf of
Women who have seen their sons or husbands
Setting forth and not returning:
Figlia del tuo figlio (Daughter of your Son)
Queen of Heaven.*

*Also pray for those who were in ships, and
Ended their voyage on the sand, in the sea's lips
Or in the dark throat which will not reject them
Or wherever cannot reach them the sound of the sea bell's
Perpetual Angelus.*