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George E. Mayer

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Mary and Contemporary Spirituality¹

George E. Mayer

*Doctoral Candidate,
Toronto School of Theology*

Text: Luke 1:46-55 (Festival of Mary, Mother of Our Lord)

To recognize Mary, on a Sunday in the church year, as the Mother of our Lord, is to confront a major problem of contemporary Christian spirituality with the power of the Gospel.

The problem is our contemporary trend to glorify individualism. The individual is queen or king. "Individual rights" have been enshrined in the Canadian charter of rights and freedoms. Legal cases are developing by the hundreds to protect the "rights" of the individual over against her or his social environment or context. Communities or groups of people seem to have less importance. Individuals rule!

Our desire to glorify the individual, when focused on the person of Mary, Mother of our Lord, also brings Protestants of various sorts, including Lutherans, perhaps mostly Lutherans, face to face with their anti-Roman Catholic prejudices. For, to heighten an awareness of the importance of Mary, to call her "Mother of our Lord", sounds like a very Roman Catholic thing to do. To glorify, indeed almost to deify, Mary is to shift the focus of our faithful attention from Jesus to his mother. Most Protestants will have nothing to do with making Mary a God herself, and many believe that is what Roman Catholics tend to do.

But such a view of another strain in the great tradition of the Christian churches throughout the world, limits or prohibits a fresh look at the importance of Mary for all people of faith. If one is against Mary because one does not want to be consumed by the perceived emphasis of another Christian

denomination, then one loses the opportunity to discover how Mary might be instructive for our own faith life today. One result is that we dismiss Mary as unimportant to the development of our spiritual life. Another danger is that we ignore her altogether.

I suggest to you today, that we take a fresh look at the witness of Mary, the Mother of our Lord, so that our spiritual life might develop new growth in the face of the limiting perspective of individualism.

The witness of Mary to us is found in all the important events of her son's life: in the birth cycle, at the first miracle during the wedding feast at Cana, at the foot of the cross, at the tomb on Easter day, and waiting with the apostles for the gift of the Spirit. She shares the fullness of human emotion and thought in reaction and response to these events—wonder, confusion and questioning, disappointment, pain, grief, pondering these things in her heart, remaining faithful to the end, expecting new surprises by the grace of God.

Probably the most important affirmation of faith that we hear from Mary in all the Scriptures is the Gospel text for this festival, which traditionally is called the "Magnificat". Here, Mary praises God at the announcement of her pregnancy, at the realization of what she has been called to do with her life, at the awesome task of birthing and nurturing the one the world will call Lord!

This psalm or song of praise has been sung by the church at vespers since the very earliest decades of the Christian church. Actually, it has roots deep in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, especially in the song Hannah sang at the birth of Samuel, in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. The magnificat is a prime example of Hebrew lyrical poetry at its best.

Mary's song of praise is also a prime example of the perspective the Christian church has brought to society, especially as it confronts rampant and invasive individualism.

The "Magnificat" is printed in two places in our *Lutheran Book of Worship*. It is part of the vespers liturgy, or the service for evening prayer, on pages 147-148. A second musical version is expressed as Canticle number six.

I've taken the liberty of sharing a contemporary English translation of the original Hebrew, from Old Testament scholar

Samuel Terrien. It is printed on one side of the bulletin insert. I've shared this to highlight several key word translations which express, better than the traditional words, the mood of Mary's song of praise.

The first line is most important, setting the mood for the rest.

In the traditional translation: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my saviour."

In the newer translation: "My whole being celebrates the grandeur of the Lord; And my spirit thrills in God my salvation."

We get stuck in a narrow view of what we today call "spirituality" when we use the term soul, spirit, or mind in opposition to flesh, body, or physical matter. Greek philosophers like Plato found it useful to think of splitting people in two; into spirit and flesh, or mind and body, or celibacy and sexuality. But this is not the same meaning given to human beings by the Hebrew language.

Mary seeks to celebrate the presence of God with her "whole being", not simply what has been described as her soul. All of Mary is involved in her ecstatic and joyous celebration: her body, mind, spirit, sexuality, all of her senses, everything is devoted to praising God.

Why? God has interrupted her life with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has overwhelmed her, stopped her in her tracks, changed her life forever with a fantastic announcement. She is going to have a child, and that child will grow to be the Lord and Saviour of humankind. Wow!

Mary's whole being is involved.

She celebrates the grandeur of God!

Her whole mood is to celebrate and recognize what God will do through her. The focus is not on Mary as an individual, not on the aggrandizement of a particular person in time, but on the power and Spirit of God working through people. The greatness of the Creator God is available to humankind even in the most insignificant people who leave themselves open to be God's servants.

When Mary says, "Behold! on this account, all generations shall proclaim my happiness!" she is not referring to her own happiness as an individual, but to the happiness or blessedness

of the community, the generations of the church, who come to realize that the Creator God was given fleshly expression in her son, Jesus, the Christ. The happiness is offered to all. God's great deeds are no longer dimly remembered events of the past social history of Mary's people, but a cause for present celebration and the means for future hope! Generation to generation of the future church will experience the "womblike compassion" of her Son. The world will never be the same. The forgiveness of the Creator has been brought to earth.

So, Mary's "spirituality" is full-bodied as she reacts with awesome celebration to the news of what God is doing through her. Mary's intention is not to magnify her own importance as an individual, but to proclaim the magnitude of what God is doing through her for all of humanity.

While anticipating and celebrating the future, Mary also remembers. Past events of God's history with her Hebrew people recall for her the strange action of God among this seemingly destitute and insignificant people. God's power disperses and defeats the elements of culture glorified by individualism: the proud are scattered in their conceit, the potentate rulers are deposed, the rich are sent away empty-handed,... and the humble are exalted while the hungry are filled with good things.

Mary's celebration is also a call to reinstate attention to a revolution of values by God's people. If God can visit a humble woman-slave like Mary and impregnate her with the Spirit of God's life, and if she can recall how God has visited the humble slave-boy nation Israel with "womblike compassion", then we are called, as God's humble slave women and men in the church today, to speak of and bear witness to the power of God's seed working in us.

The promise God spoke to "Abraham, and his seed forever" is a powerful mandate for God's people in the church today. It is a socially responsible, not the individualistically irresponsible, direction which Mary shows us as she celebrates the wonder of God's Spirit in her. The direction and promise of God are for justice for all God's creation. God directs Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, "Go out... so that in you... all the families of the earth shall seek one another's welfare."

That is our call today also, as inheritors of God's promise and directives through Mary's Son.

Mary points us toward a full-bodied contemporary spirituality through Jesus, her Son, in recognition of his compassion for all the world. She invites us to celebrate with her the wonder of God's forgiving love for all peoples by seeking justice for our neighbours now.

Notes

- ¹ Preached at Christ Lutheran Church, Waterloo, 15 August 1993, when Mr. Mayer was pastor of that congregation.