

Mary: Advent's Neglected VIP

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 14 December 2014, by David Gill. The readings for the third Sunday of Advent were Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, St John 1:6-8,19-28.

You may not have heard much *about* it, but you certainly hear a lot *from* it. I'm referring to what is called the Revised Common Lectionary. It is a three-year cycle of Bible readings, followed in many denominations, many countries and most congregations of the Uniting Church. For each Sunday it gives us one reading from the Hebrew scriptures followed by a psalm in response, a reading from the gospels – for the next twelve months we're focusing on Mark -- and a reading from the epistles of the early Church.

Using the lectionary has many advantages. It pushes us reflect on the major seasons and festivals of the Christian year. It stops preachers riding their pet hobbyhorses into the ground. It sets us thinking about passages and biblical themes we might otherwise dodge. And it keeps us in sync with other Christians. So, three cheers for the Revised Common Lectionary.

Well, make that two-and-a-half cheers. Occasionally I find myself wondering what the experts who drew up the lectionary were thinking. Take the gospel readings for Advent this year. On the first Sunday we heard Jesus telling people to get ready, be prepared. Last Sunday John the Baptist appeared, telling people to repent. Today, a second instalment of John the Baptist. There is only one more Sunday before Christmas, just ten more sleeps, and we've yet to hear anything about a very special Advent person: the woman early Christians referred to as *Theotokos*, the bearer of God.

The lectionary is not alone in neglecting Mary. The Uniting Church, for example, has congregations named for St Stephen, St Andrew, St Thomas, St Matthew, St John, St Aidan, St David and the Trinity. It has Wesleys galore. But have you ever come across one bearing the name of St Mary?

Or look at the stained glass in this building. Here in the sanctuary, downstairs in the hall and in various nooks and crannies, there is lots of it, recalling stories of

the Bible and key convictions of the Church. You will also find pointers to places and events that have had special significance for our people -- badges of the cities of Edinburgh and Sydney, for example; the crest of the University of Sydney; a picture of John Flynn Memorial Church in Alice Springs; even the badge of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. And there are at least two Burning Bushes!

The main window is the one you're looking at now, the big Armstrong Sutherland Window behind me. You can't see much of it because of the workers' scaffolding outside, so you'll have to trust me.

In the centre are three panels. The middle one shows Christ in glory. In the block on your left, four great figures of the Hebrew scriptures – Abraham, Moses, David and Ezekiel. On your right, four key figures of the Christian scriptures – John the Baptist, St John, St Paul and the patron of this church, St Stephen.

Which should be fine. They are all worthy men – and I do mean men! But someone's missing from this colourful exercise in Christian education. Yes, you guessed it: the mother of the Lord. Nowhere, in all our stained glass.

Without her there would be no St Stephen's, no Church, no Christian faith ... no Jesus of Nazareth. Yet she doesn't get a look in. Maybe our forbears assumed that religious leadership is men's business. Maybe old-style Protestant prejudice got the better of our windows' designers. Whatever the explanation, Mary fell right out of the picture. Which, alas, all too often she still does.

So today we will by-pass the lectionary. We will ignore the Mary-phobia of those who name our churches. We will cast a discreet veil over the sexist windows. And we'll give the bearer of God the place that is rightly hers. Our Reformation fathers, Luther and Calvin, felt able to honour her. Their 21st century children should do so too.

Of course, the mother of Jesus is not alone in the stories surrounding his advent. Those stories portray pious, obedient, faithful Jewish people finding the meaning of their lives in being part of what God is doing in and for the world. The parents and relatives of Jesus, and their friends, and eventually people like John the

Baptist, give themselves gladly, hopefully, expectantly, to playing their parts in the fulfillment of the divine purpose.

Among them, Mary is central. Like all religious figures, however, she has suffered from her admirers. Those who come out of the Protestant bit of the Christian family have been suspicious of the veneration of Mary, and given the excesses of years past that is hardly surprising. But the Protestant reaction has itself been an excess. Mary has a unique place in the saga of salvation. Her place as a continuing inspiration to the faithful should be equally special.

“Blessed are you among women!” This, according to Luke’s gospel, was the Spirit-inspired verdict of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth. The same conviction has been echoed by believers through twenty centuries. Blessed are you, Mary, the bearer of God. Blessed are you, the one who was totally available, entirely obedient to the divine purpose. Blessed are you, the exemplar of godliness for all ages.

Here, then, is the counterpoint to the mess humanity knows itself to be in. Sin, we realize, is less a matter of infringing certain rules than a far-reaching separation, alienation, estrangement between us and God, and between human beings themselves. By the same token, holiness is less a matter of adhering to certain rules than a far-reaching availability, sensitivity, responsiveness to the purposes of God.

Some of what passes for Christian piety has been getting this seriously wrong. We hear a lot of what might be called “Instant Gratification Christianity” – which in fact is Western consumerism writ large and given a religious gloss. This warped gospel proclaims “Believe thus and so, and everything in your life will fall neatly into place. Commit yourself to Christ, and watch your business prosper. Insert a prayer into the great cosmic slot machine, and out will roll a can of whatever your heart most desires”.

Mary’s faith centred on God, not herself; on patient availability for the achievement of God’s purposes, not instant gratification in the achievement of her own.

Advent calls us to a renewed availability to God. That means offering God not only our gifts, our strengths. But also our weaknesses, our failures. We all carry scars, most of them invisible but all of them real. We are all of us frail, though we do our damndest to pretend otherwise. Those weaknesses and failures, scars and frailties, we should also offer to God, for by his grace they too may be taken up and used to his glory.

At this holy time the Australian churches provide us with a very tangible means for giving expression to our availability.

For 65 years, the churches of Australia have had their Christmas Bowl Appeal. Each Christmas since 1949, we have sought to reach out together in Christ's name to the hungry, the refugees, the downtrodden, the exploited, those the world would prefer to forget. It's the movement for Christian unity, with its sleeves rolled up. Last Sunday, and I think this morning too, you have received the Christmas bowl envelopes. I commend the Bowl for your sacrificial support.

But when all the cheques are signed, when the last envelope is in, what then of your availability to God, and of mine? When our spiritual resources are so limited, our strength is so fragile, our faith so hesitant, our need so great?

Then it is that you and I are recalled to the paradox of the gospel: namely, that dying and living, giving and receiving, seeking the fulfillment of others and finding fulfillment ourselves, are but opposite sides of one and the same coin.

That paradox is expressed powerfully in a prayer I have quoted to you before. That prayer has meant a lot to me, especially at times when the going has been rough. Some of you asked for the words, so here they are again.

Lord, when I am hungry, give me someone to feed.

When I am thirsty, give me someone whose thirst I may assuage.

And when I am cold, someone to clothe.

When I am sad, give me someone to cheer.

*When my burden is heavy, give me also those of others,
and when I need love, may others ask for mine.*

May your will be my food,

*your grace my strength and
your love my rest.*

*May my whole life be a gift perpetually offered to you, O Father,
until the day when you are pleased to receive it back again.*

To that prayer, Mary would have been the first to say: Amen Lord. Amen.

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