

Perplexity and Joy

John 19:25-30

“There stood by the cross of Jesus his mother.” (Jo.19:26)

Only John thinks to mention her presence there. The other three Gospels forget. All her life, she had been easily overlooked, easily forgotten. She knew her “low estate.”

We Protestants have overlooked her too. She is still easy for us to forget. Yet, she would not hold it against us. In her life, she was accustomed to that.

She was born of peasant stock. Rough hands they had, necks reddened by the sun. “People of the land” were her people. Hers was the lowest estate – not much joy in that. At the temple, her family had little to offer – maybe “two doves.” The upper classes smiled at them and tried to forget them.

And she had been born woman in a man’s world – little joy in that either. When not needed, the men then tried not to remember women. Did not even the boys pray every day in the synagogue: “Blessed art thou, O Lord, ... who hast not made me a woman!” At her birth, did her father sigh and try to recall the proverb: “A daughter is to a father a deceptive treasure, and the care of her putteth away sleep.” He called her “Mary.” It means “Bitter.” Is that the way her father felt when she was delivered? “Mary” also means “The Fat One.” Was it that he said, “Well, you only give me a girl, wife, but at least she’s a strong, fat one!”

All her life, easily forgotten, she must have been. They married her off, very early, to a local carpenter, who would not expect the dowry she could not bring. He, too, was poor and kind. He also died too soon. Mary, the strong one, worked hard. “God’s slave,” she called herself. (Think of that, when you have time. There’s meaning there.)

She pinned all her hopes, and the hopes of her other (was it seven?) children on her first-born son. She called his name “Jesus.” It meant “Saviour.” Amidst the perplexity of her early life, that name reflects the first fragment of joy. “Jesus” – the name shines like a broken bit of glass, catching light in the shadows of Nazareth. You see, for Mary, there were dreams in that name. (There still are.) He was going to save them all. If he didn’t, who would? The world was not kind, especially to a peasant widow with many children.

But, like almost everything else in her life, this oldest son was also a source of perplexity. It was so from the start.

Visions, like bright darkness, disturbed her at childbirth. And Luke says she was “afraid.” Strange hopes, like voices, rang in her ears. “(This child will be given) ... the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his Kingdom there will be no end ... (he will be called) holy, the Son of God.” (Lk. 1:30,33,35, RSV) Was she going mad?

These were peculiar longings for a peasant woman, not something to tell the neighbors. No wonder “Mary kept all these things (to herself), pondering them (wondering what they meant) in her heart.” (Lk. 2:19, RSV) It kept the neighbors from laughing, as Mark said they finally did, 30 years later, when it all came out: “(Who does he think he is? they said) Is not this the Son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon (and all those sisters)?” (Mk. 6:3; Mt. 13:55-56) No wonder Mary kept quiet, very quiet, about those mother’s hopes she had in him – from his birth.

But if his infancy was a source of perplexity and joy to her, so was his childhood. At 12, he was already acting independent, beginning to live in a world alien to her, lost to her while he argued with strange teachers about God, and scaring her with his talk of having “business” outside the family to attend to, his “Father’s business,” he called it. What did he mean? Luke says her heart was crossed with “sorrow,” for she “understood not.” (2:50) She must have felt again the forgotten feeling, searching for the boy so frantically that day in the temple, and finding him so pre-occupied he had not missed her, untouched by her fears. But even here, was there not a small fragment of joy? Was he not talking to doctors of the faith, and did they not find him a bright, good boy?

As an adult, Jesus was even more, for Mary, a source of perplexity and joy. Boys do not cease to be problems when they grow up.

For example, at that wedding in Cana ... her daughter’s wedding?... Why else was she so anxious about refreshments? ... her daughter’s wedding... Ah, at last...the forgotten mother’s moment to shine ... an hour of joy for her. Let her have it, for God’s sake. She deserved it, God knows. And a time to be proud of her son too. Why not? She had little enough to be proud of. He was, at 30, only a village carpenter, and not a conformist at that, often off in the hills by himself. Now, she could say to the folks at the wedding, “Call my son; see what he can...” But he had his own way of having to do. He didn’t exactly say “No” to her. Were there tears down

the old, familiar face? At any rate, he changed his mind. Good. There was wine. And Mary? Mary had a broken fragment of joy that day. She needed it.

After that, he left home all together. He had to. There was a God calling him, and he was upsetting all the right people getting there. He was saying strange things. They were beginning to laugh at her first-born. It was more than she could take.

She had courage, that woman. With her younger children around her, she pushed her way through the crowds. She was coming to take him home. One of the disciples called to Jesus: "Thy mother and brothers stand without." (Mk. 3:35) That was a sad, sharp word: "without." As the crowds grew, Mary felt she was more and more, standing without, out on the edge of the storm he was creating, standing and waiting for him to come home.

She was standing there still, the day he died. "There stood by the cross of Jesus his mother." He never came home. He couldn't go home again. But give her credit. She was not possessive. She didn't try to push him. She just realized, long before Peter and his new-found friends, where all this was leading him. He was killing himself, and she only wanted to protect him. She was coming to take him home. Give her full credit.

In the hours it took him to die, I wonder what she was thinking? She had a long time to think, for she "stood by."

Did she slowly remember that in his preaching, he had wanted the whole world to be like his boyhood home? It had been very simple. But there had been love there, and sacrifice there, and forgiveness there. Was it not there her son dreamed a dream for all men: one family under God as Father? Was this not a figure of the home she and Joseph had made? And was this thought not a fragment of joy to her?

And if it was not a home she could go back to, Jesus dying, thought of that. At the end, he did not forget her who did not forget him. He said to the disciple standing by, whom he loved, "Behold, thy mother!" (Jo. 19:27) No wonder, of all the Gospels, John remembered her, for he "took her into his own home."

It is that word "home" that makes us feel all is well, at last, for Mary. As John leads her away, she is not an old woman – hardly 50, but she has lived a long, long time, and she has many memories, and will tell them now, and not be afraid, and she will be heard. Following the resurrection, there is so much they want to know now, and only she can tell them: only she can tell them of angels and shepherds and wise men. So she talks, and she talks, and she talks, and

the years roll away, and she lives them again, and they are sweeter now, for she begins to understand what they mean.

The last sight we have of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is in the book of Acts. She is together with the other disciples after the resurrection. No longer standing without, no longer forgotten, overlooked no more, she is at home with them now, praying a prayer of thanksgiving. Her soul had found its home.

And did she not have a prayer of her own to pray? I think, for the rest of her life, she must have prayed it every day:

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my Spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour,
For he hath looked upon the low estate of his handmaid:
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;
And holy is his name.”

Amen.

O God, we confess there is much in life that perplexes us, that our estate is often low, yet, as we turn back the years, many fragments of joy shine from the shadows, and at last – we understand those we love, and, by Thee, are understood, so that, far from brooding, we would sing and rejoice in God our Saviour, for life has been, in all things, sweet and good, and we would live it all again, if we could.

Amen.

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