

Luke 1:39-55  
December 11, 2011

### Theotokos

If you could picture in your mind for a moment a Christmas Pageant, (we are going to have one here next week) we might for the sake of simplicity say that there are two types. The traditional Christmas Pageant uses the Christmas stories from the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew and may supplement those words with some imagined likely dialogue between biblical characters. A more modern and perhaps creative Christmas Pageant offers a contemporary setting for a drama which usually cleverly incorporates the biblical Christmas drama into the story. I have lost count but I think I have been in or witnessed a good 45 Christmas Pageants and in my mind I am trying to see the Marys. Can you see Mary? Can you remember a Mary from a Christmas Pageant?

I would have to say that Mary over the years has been portrayed as a loving, precious, appreciated, simple but special presence. I can remember many instances of young girls very proud to depict Mary and several instances of young girls vying to be Mary in the pageants. I can remember my sister as Mary. I can remember my daughter as Mary. Yet in almost every instance my mind can

reconstruct, save one; I have seen Mary portrayed as a special, but rather benign presence. Basically Mary wears blue, marches up with Joseph, sits on a stool and simply looks adoringly but passively upon the Christ Child. Mary has been maternal and kind but bland. In short the Mary's of my pageants past bear little resemblance to the firecracker that pops off the hot pepper prose, of what has become named the Magnificat or the Canticle of Mary. The Mary's of my Christmases past do not seem true to the words Mary speaks in Luke.

There are other understandings of Mary out there in the world of faith and one of them is called *Theotokos*. *Theotokos* is Greek for Mother of God or literally God bearer. *Theotokos* is a foreign word and for we who are mainline Protestants, in some ways Mary as *Theotokos* is a foreign concept. Yes we know that Mary was the mother of Jesus and a pretty cool mom to go ahead and say YES at such a young age to some Angel about giving birth to the coming wonder child. We mainline Protestants tend to translate the word virgin as "young woman" as opposed to one who never had sexual relations until it came to the siblings of Jesus. We focus on two words early in her song magnify and rejoicing. Mary says her soul

magnifies the Lord and her Spirit rejoices. We understand her to be so happy about her role as a special disciple that her heart is earnestly and wholly worshipping God. Her experience with her cousin Elizabeth was such a deep confirmation for her and such a deep comfort and confirmation for Elizabeth that her heart just sings out with praise. Some of us may be embarrassed to admit it but we have had these moments of exploding in praise or singing in the shower. Curiously enough Christmas Carols for many of us evoke such joy and peacefulness. So we mainline Protestants see Mary as the deeply committed model disciple and inspiring example of how we should respond to God's call to us. She went out of her way and put her life as she knew at risk, to say Yes and to be the mother of Baby Jesus and how hard it was for her at age 47 maybe to see her baby on the cross. Discipleship has its ups and downs and Mary handled them.

Seeing Mary as Theotokos Mother of God definitely goes beyond the model disciple mode. Images on screen here are of well known icons of Mary which venerate her as God bearer and blessed person. Mary for many Catholics and Orthodox Christians holds a special emotional place that is hard for Mainline Protestants and

especially Evangelical Protestants to understand. Just as Fundamentalist Christians revere the words of the Bible as so Holy they almost worship them; many Catholics and Orthodox revere Mary. It might appear to Protestants that Orthodox and Catholic Christians pray to Mary and worship her and some superstitious souls do; but officially or in reality they pray through Theotokos to God.

Protestants have often been suspicious of such praying, especially when it involves statues and icons and paintings. It seemed to some of the Protestant Reformers of the 14 and 15 hundreds that such images were actually competing with God and robbing God of God's glory and sovereignty; and so sometimes protestants called such praying and such images idolatry. But a lot of beautiful art work was painted over or destroyed by radical protestant nut jobs who were probably just expressing anger over some of the practices of the church, which were indeed corrupt. And a beautiful piece of Art once destroyed is a treasure lost to the future.

To be clear – an icon, a painting, a stained glass window a statue, although revered, would at the most be understood in the Orthodox and Catholic world as a window for reaching toward the one and only true God. Theotokos is not to be understood as Mother of

the eternal God but only as mother of Jesus who was both fully human and fully divine. An icon or painting of Mary the Mother of God might be viewed as something like a hymn. Yes the words of a hymn or contemporary hymn are a prayer to God but does not the music provide a window to God that helps lift the prayer? And let's step out a little with logic and faith here. If you want to be close to Jesus, does it not makes sense from a certain world view anyway, to try to get close to him through his mother? You know, nine months of bonding like no Father can ever fully understand.

And naturally when we engage in such discussion or what some puritans would clearly label useless speculation, we leave the realm of neutral rational or Newtonian scientific thinking and we turn our back on the purest Presbyterian Theology. When we gaze emotionally upon an Icon of Mary, we step over certain objections and we move backwards or forward into the emotional world of the mysterious and the heart. This consideration of an alternative Christian world view might curiously enough be made more tolerable and even welcome by the funky multi realities or dimensions posited by the wizards of Quantum Physics or the bold imaginations of the creators of Science Fiction. So Theotokos Mary is the Revered one

and maybe even a Mantra or a Mandala, to use Eastern words, to help people focus on the one and true Holy. And yes there is a whole set of enthusiasms for Mary out there called Mariology – that go well beyond reverence and we would find close to whacky and definitely inappropriate; but the whole point of the discussion today is that Mary might well be a little more than the model disciple that Evangelical and Mainline Protestants make her out to be.

But you know much as our Orthodox and Catholic brothers and sister appreciate Theotokos and go well beyond our understanding of Mary as Model disciple, I am going to have to say that they too fall short of the radical picture our man Luke paints of Mary. Don't you think it's rather patriarchal and sexist to ascribe reverence to Mary based merely on how she uses her womb. In fact there is a whole Christian tradition out there that appreciates Mary for her heart, mind and wit and the fool she was to actually laugh and sing crazy things about Jesus. Not that I am not saying that this tradition understood Mary as a moron or an idiot; no there's proof that for a portion of Christian History, Mary was understood by some to be a jester in the pattern of John Stewart and Steven Colbert. When she sang things like God's arm would whack the proud and the powerful and knock

them off their thrones, it was understood as a lampoon of Queens and Kings, a satire on pomp and regalia. There were even “Christian” celebrations that made fun of bishops, cardinals and popes who as we all know, like the rest of us, can learn to take themselves way too seriously. So not only was Mary, a perfect young lass the model disciple, the mother of God and a window to the holy but she was the John Stewart of her time who made fun of Herod and Caesar and all their collaborators and little toadies who in the presence of God are mere insects.

And still, if we look critically and carefully at Mary’s Song the Magnificat, we are not satisfied for this is a serious song. Yes we can see the radical yes to God. Yes we can see Mother Mary Theotokos and yes we can see how people who lived for centuries under tyrannical monarchies and power hungry Popes could understand Mary as a bold jester poking fun at the pompous; but can we see Mary as an occupy Jerusalem protestor, an Occupy Wall Street demonstrator an Occupy Rome prophet who could sing the words “he has scattered the proud, he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, he has lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty”, as if they had

already happened, even though her son the savior had not yet been born? Can we see Mary as Elijah or John the Baptist?

The problem with the Christmas Pageant Mary is that she is a wimp, the problem with the Theotokos Mary is that she is just a womb, the problem with the comedic Mary is that she is just a Jester, the problem with the model disciple Mary is that she is a quiet unassuming polite and they all fall short of the true and complete Mary who is all these things and an honest to goodness firebrand prophet to boot. The problem with all these other Marys is that they sell her short, domesticate her and relegate her to the ornamental shelves of quaint religious half-heartedness. Perhaps this is only a literary device but when Luke puts these words on Mary's lips she sings a wild song which summarizes the radical Gospel that in thirty years will get Jesus killed. The problem with all these other Mary's is that they present an only half or quarter spirit filled person. And she was not! She rejoiced fully for she could see God's future as if it was fully realized now.

Yesterday in Norway Three women were jointly awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace because of their energetic work for justice for women, for their nonviolent struggle for the safety of women and for

women's rights as peacemakers. I don't know much about them, and I was disappointed that they did not make the front page of the Washington Post , but I do know whether they know it or not, that they know the Mary about whom I speak. The President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, her fellow Liberian Lehman Gbowee and Tawakkol Karman a Yemeni Journalist and political activist who at age 32 in the youngest Noble Peace Prize Laureate and first Arab Woman to receive the award. They know the Mary that Understands God's future as the now! That's what prophetic is.

I have to admit, I am a sucker for Christmas Pageants. When I see the kids get up there and act out that Christmas drama, even in the midst of forgotten lines and makeshift costumes I get that lump in the throat, that choked up thing for somehow they make God seem a little closer. By being in the Gospel they make the Gospel Closer and an 8 year Mary looking adoringly baby Jesus is just what we want. But we are 28, 48 and 68 and we must admit that at 16 17 or 18 Mary was wise beyond her years, because she had the courage to speak God's future with conviction.