

Advent 3
11/12/2011

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 7:1 – 11, 16

Magnificat

Romans 16:25 - 27

Luke 1:26 – 38

The freedom of God: the Lord will make you a house

Today we put aside the readings for Advent III to reflect on the Incarnation and Mary's involvement in the story of faith. Ironically in our part of the Christian family sermons are preached on Ruth and Naomi, Sarah, and other women in the bible such as those who came to the tomb on Easter morning, but little attention is given to Mary. And yet, from a biblical perspective she is integral to the Gospel and rightly has a place among the prophetic figures of the New Testament.

The Protestant silence about Mary, not shared by the pre-Reformation churches, is even more curious because much of the symbolism Mary attracts emerges directly from Scripture. Her titles "the Blessed Virgin" and "mother of God" are deeply grounded in the Gospel. She recognized she was graced by God, and in accepting the role, which she did not choose for herself, Mary became a model of what discipleship means for all people.

Mary received little official attention in the first two centuries, but in popular piety there was strong interest in her [Elizabeth Johnston p 118]. In the third and fourth centuries, when the church set out to define the humanity and divinity of God in Christ, Mary was given a much stronger place in the official teachings of the church, which she has retained to this day.

It is easy to see how the Gospel and the Magnificat provide material for a sermon, but what has the reading from Samuel got to do with Mary? The reading is one of many parts of Scripture read allegorically, to cast light on Mary's role. Interpreters borrowed freely from the Hebrew Scriptures to create images that were later reflected in the icons of the East and the art of the West. Mary was pictured as the spiritual garden of Eden, in which the second Adam dwelt, she was seen as the Second Eve who brought forth the New Adam, she was the Burning Bush – unharmed by her contact with the divine, and, most creatively she was "the loom of the flesh on which the Holy Spirit wove the one who was to be truly God and truly human" [Constas, p 177 – 180].

With allegorical thinking in mind the first connection between the text from Samuel and the image of Mary can be made with the idea that her body was the tabernacle, the temple or "house" in which the new Law, the Law of Christ was laid. This gives us a lead into Samuel.

The background to the discussion between King David, Nathan the Prophet and the Lord in Samuel is that the kingdom of David has developed. His foes have been overcome, he has a city to live in and has built himself a palace. Significantly he has reclaimed the Ark of the Covenant that has travelled everywhere with the people as a sign of God's presence. It is now set up in the city but in the tent that was always its home. David said to the prophet Nathan that since the King now lived in a Palace, the ark of God should have a better home too. Very sound reasoning that coincidentally would give legitimacy to David's dynasty – his "house".

Without pausing to seek a word from the Lord on the matter Nathan agreed with the King: "go and do this". He was in error and so was David. On his own say so David is about create a home for God – a Temple in the city that will stand as a guarantee of the presence of God. And it will also be seen as a sign of God's support for his political ambitions. Church and State are about to be joined in such a way that the freedom of God may be co-opted for political purposes. Nathan the prophet has gone along with this "good idea" rather seek a word from God. So God sought Nathan: *"That same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: go and tell my servant David, you are not the one to build me a house to live in"* [v 5].

What is at stake is God's freedom to be God. In what follows Nathan reviews the history of David's relationship with God. It is a recital in which David is given no credit. He owes everything to God, whose relentless, gracious will has created him as he is. The point is, God wants to continue deal with David as God has dealt with him in the past. All the language tells us this: "I will make for you a great name [v 9], I will appoint a place [v 10] I will give you rest [v 11]". Not by his political cleverness or his prowess in battle, but because of the freedom and power of God will David receive a reputation and live in safety in the world [Brueggemann 2 Sam p 255].

The climax is in the words: "*the Lord will make you a house*", to which the word "forever" is added with emphasis [v 16]. This is a difficult passage in which high theology is tinged with political ideology. It hard to find where the oracle of God ends and self-serving political propaganda begins [Brueggemann p 255]. There is a play on words and a reversal of roles. "House" can mean Temple or Dynasty. What is clear is that David will not build the Lord a house: God will build David a "dynasty". The two are connected, but in the case of David, "house" speaks of the emergence of a new social reality: a people who will always retain the loyalty of God, and will be called to live in that reality.

There are no ifs and buts here. In the freedom of God, an unconditional promise is made that God's presence in the world, represented by the community of David imaged as a "house", will continue far into the future. We do not repudiate the particularity of the house of David, but we must also see that this involves the faithful response of people who allow the Spirit of God to dwell in them and lead them. A community of people who become "home" for the Spirit of God and who together, through faith in the call and gifts of God, live out being a "household of God".

Mary's story connects strongly with the idea that God is free. The Angel's message was that God was about to do a remarkable new thing effective for all time. Although Mary was perplexed, and said she "had no knowledge of a man" she faithfully accepted that the power of God, which is the power of creation and new creation, would overcome any incapacity in her. She also acted in freedom and consented to allow her body to become the place - the loom - on which the power of God would weave a human life. Everything in this encounter is about how God acts in freedom, and God acts in a way that is totally grounded in our humanity, which gives women a place. And this is the basis for what the Creed means when it speaks of Jesus as truly God and truly human.

Mary's story connects with the story of the Temple in Samuel in the sense that God chooses a dwelling place in the world. Towards the end of the Magnificat the density of the imagery increases so that Mary becomes the personification of Israel: the "home" for God in the world. All this is consistent. And in Christian theology, Mary as Israel becomes an image for the Church, the place where the Holy Spirit dwells and brings to birth new things in creation.

This is even clearer in the Magnificat. In her exultation Mary praises God for working in a way that is merciful. Compared with the rest of the world this is an upside down approach to governance, but one the church must respect and practice. It raises up the humble and pulls down the proud. Mary's praise widens to embrace not only what God's mercy has done for her, but what it will do for all those who "fear God" from "generation to generation". Here is sovereignty that will stand for all time because it has been brought to birth by the Spirit of God.

It may seem esoteric to try and unpack the beliefs and imagery that collect around Mary in this way. But the aim is to unveil a secret Paul refers to in Romans. Through God's faithfulness to Jesus, who was born of Mary and was "of the house of David", the Gentiles - all nations - have come to share in the obedience of faith [Rom 16:26]. With this in mind the "house of David" expands beyond a dynasty to become a worldwide "people of faith", a living Temple for the Living God. A Temple that we, as church, pray will be filled with creativity and new life this Christmas. The flesh and blood reality of God with us: Emmanuel.
