

Theological Reflection We Pause Again

Midst the hustle and bustle of Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday parties and gift buying, we pause once again in this year of 2012 as in so many others before, to think about a baby. We have time during these Advent days, if we take the time, to sit by a manger scene before us on a table or in our imagination and consider what God has done for us.

We can linger over the events in Mary's life just as she pondered what those words of Gabriel meant. How could a young girl, a virgin, be pregnant with God? He who reigns in heaven over all the world is now on earth having taken her flesh to become a man. The Creator of all things becomes a frail creature in the womb. He who shelters all in the "shadow of his wings" takes shelter as a helpless babe in the fleshy womb of Mary. The Word, God himself, takes the form of a human embryo taking the same path to birth that we all have. Life itself fills Mary.

I quote St. Ephrem a poet/saint of the 4th century so we might prayerfully consider his words:

"It is a source of great amazement my beloved, that someone should inquire into the wonder of how God came down and made his dwelling a womb, and how that Being put on the body of a man; spending nine months in a womb, not shrinking from such a home; and how a womb of flesh was able to carry flaming fire, and how a flame dwelt in a moist womb which did not get burnt up. Just as the bush on Horeb bore God in the flame, so did Mary bear Christ in her virginity, Perfectly God, he entered the womb through her ear; in all purity the God-man came forth from the womb into creation."

To help those of you unfamiliar with the early Church Father's belief that Mary conceived "through her ear," I say that it was upon hearing the words of Gabriel and assenting to them that she conceived. Hence it was through hastening or through her ear that she conceived by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. There are paintings showing the words of Gabriel entering Mary's ear during the Annunciation.

One of my favorite titles of Mary from the Litany of Loreto is "Ark of the Covenant." This title holds within it two powerful images for Christian believers. It conjures up in our memory and imagination Noah's Ark that saved mankind from destruction and then the "Ark of the Covenant" which held the tablets given to Moses and manna and the staff. It was upon this box (ark) adorned with golden seraphim that God rested. He took up residence upon this Ark. How fitting

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then to understand and acknowledge that Mary herself is the “Ark of the Covenant.”

How exciting it was to hear the biblical background of this title from the lips of Father Rene Laurentin who in 1957 had written about this relationship between the biblical Ark and the Virgin Mary. I recall his enthusiasm in relating this biblical reflection to our Mariology class at the International Marian Research Institute. He pointed out the relationship between Luke’s recounting of “Jesus-in-Mary’s) journey to Elizabeth and the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6. All of this is recounted in Saward’s Redeemer in the Womb.

The parallel between recounting the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant and Mary’s traveling up into the Judean hills (cf. 2 Samuel 6:2); Luke 1:39) is striking. So let’s look at the parallel. Elizabeth’s words of greeting match the awe of David as he receives the Ark; “And why is this granted me?” (Luke 1:43) “How can the Ark of the Lord come to me? (2 Samuel 6:9). I quote from Saward. “The Ark, like Mary, travels up into the Judean hills (cf. 2 Samuel 6:2; Luke 1:39). The transfer, like the Visitation, is an occasion of delight (cf. 2 Samuel 6:12; Luke 1:44). David the King ‘and dances before the Lord’; so does John the Baptist (cf. Luke 1:44). The Ark remains in the house of Obededom for three months (2 Samuel 6:11); Mary stays with Elizabeth ‘for three months’ (Luke 1:56). The inexactness in the chronology is important. It shows that Luke’s intention is the reporting of historical facts (cf. Luke 1:2), not the inventing of symbolic stories.”

“The Babe in the womb is God, so the expectant Mother is the definitive Ark.” She is the sanctuary of his presence. “When the angel appears to Zechariah the Priest to announce the Baptist’s birth, he visits him in the place of his cultic duties, in the Temple, amid the swirl of incense (cf. Luke 1:8 ff). But Gabriel brings his glad tidings to Mary in her home: Mary is ‘substituted for the sanctuary.’” Zechariah’s angel appears “on the right side of the altar of incense.” Gabriel on the other hand just “comes to Mary” and speaks. “The Virgin Theotokos (God-bearer), simple laywoman that she is, is greater than any priest, more exalted than any man-made temple.”

Gabriel’s words about Mary’s overshadowing by the ‘Power of the Most High’ would recall to any Jewish mind the ‘Shekenah’ of

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Yahweh, the word coined by post biblical Judaism for the divine presence as represented so often by a dazzling cloud. Overshadowing would call to mind the cloud covering the summit of Sinai from which the Lord spoke to Moses (cf. Ex 24:15-18); the pillar of cloud, thick and gloomy by day, clear and bright by night, which guided the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness; the cloud that settled over the tent of meeting (cf. Ex 40:34) and the cloud filling the Temple when Solomon consecrates it (cf. 1 Chron 5:13). There can only be one conclusion: God is making himself present in Mary.”

The Incarnation is the elevation of human littleness through its assumption by the creator. And through Mary, by her faith and in her body, Israel’s longing for God to come down from heaven is fulfilled. Because of Mary’ yes the incomprehensible God dwells among men as a man!

And so in these Advent days we pause from our busy schedule to consider God’s power and presence. We wonder at the mystery of a God who is so far above and beyond us (transcendent) but who is at the same time so close to us (immanent). It is the Virgin Mother who brings the mystery together. All of the just mentioned cloud references of the Old Testament come ever more real as the Holy Spirit overshadows Mary. As the Jews begged that their distant God, el Shaddai the God of the Mountain, would draw nearer so God answered that prayer in and through Mary. In Mary, God now dwells bodily among his people.

We sit with Mary, who like us, ponders how he who is so hidden for all time reveals himself; how he who is so totally unlike us becomes one of us as a man; and how he who cannot be contained even by the vastness of created space now is conceived without human seed and dwells in the small confinement of a virgin’s womb.

Dear God, you rend the heavens and come down into the Virgin Mary’s spotless womb. She represents all of humanity and is your highly favored one. Reveal to us through Mary the depth of understanding the Incarnation, the Virgin conceiving and Virginal birth. Teach us to rejoice with Mary at these divine, beautiful mysteries. Mary, pray for us during these Advent days that we might take some time to ponder the mystery.

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