

Mary and her Salvation

Luke 1:47, "And Mary said: "... my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour".

Mary will be much spoken about at Christmas. Whilst the Roman Catholic tradition has much to say about Mary in terms of her being "*The Mother of God*", immaculate conception (i.e., pure and holy without sin at birth); her assumption¹ (i.e., reception into heaven without dying¹) and her being the co-redemptrix (i.e., co-worker with Christ in the atonement), the Protestant evangelical tradition has not accepted any of this. There is not one shred of biblical evidence to support this view of Mary.

However, we do not discount her completely for she did play a vital role in the matter of the incarnation. For Christ to take on a human body and be born He needed a womb. This makes sense. Mary played the part of the woman who gave birth to the God/Man.

I must confess that I do have difficulty with those folk who will insist on calling Christmas, "*Jesus' birthday*". I have seen this poster on many Churches, "*The Millennium is Jesus' 2000th birthday*". Such a statement, I believe, can be most misleading. It seems to fall in line with the 4th century Arians who did not believe in the pre-existence of Christ and stated that He was a created being of God. The Jehovah's Witnesses of the last two centuries have perpetuated this heresy into our generation.

Christ has always existed. There is much biblical evidence to support the truth that Christ was not a created being, that He did not begin His existence at the birth in Bethlehem and that Christmas cannot be Jesus' birthday. Truly, as the Incarnate Son of God He did have a beginning, His humanity was not pre-existent, and this commenced in the womb of Mary coming to full birth in Bethlehem. But, let us be clear about this matter and not make a glib statement that is misleading and that could be supportive of the heresy that states that Jesus Christ only had a beginning at Christmas. Let us be careful what we teach our children at Christmas time.

Returning to our consideration of Mary we note that far from being pure and immaculate from birth, the scripture indicates that she needed a salvation from sin as much as any other person.

The scripture that I wish for us to consider is Luke 1:46-47, "*And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour"*".

1. Mary and her salvation: "*God my Saviour*"

According to this statement, in true Old Testament style (for Jesus had not been born neither had the atonement on the cross been accomplished) Mary confirms her faith in God. The same kind of faith expressed in God by Abraham many years previously, "*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness* Genesis 15:6. Looking forward to the cross through the sacrificial system these folk could place their faith in Yahweh through which they would be justified. (For further NT evidence on Old Testament salvation through faith see Galatians 3).

¹ This teaching became accepted as part of the Roman Catholic dogma 1 November 1950 by pope Pius XII. It teaches that Mary's body was raised up from the grave after she died and that her body and soul were united and that she is now Queen of Heaven

Quite rightly, therefore, the focus of attention for Mary had to be God. And yet, she is using a phrase that is thought to be thoroughly New Testament, *“God my saviour”*. Surely such a title can only be applied to Jesus. He is the *“Saviour of the world”* (John 4:42).

Yet, the Old Testament does clearly portray God in this light. For example, 2 Samuel 22:47 *“The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God, the Rock, my Saviour!”*, Psalms 24:5 *“He will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God his Saviour”*. Isaiah 43:3 *“For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour,”* Isaiah 43:11 *“I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no Saviour”*.

We often think of God as being the great Creator of the world, and so He is; or we think of Him as the great Lawgiver, and so He is. But to conceive of Him as the *“Saviour”* seems rather strange. But, this is the Biblical teaching. We must think of God the Father as much committed to saving as Christ. Indeed, I will go as far as to say that the title *“Saviour”* is very fitting for Yahweh for this has always been His major business. God is in the business of salvation. He is a Salvation God!

It is right for us to view the entire Old Testament account as His preparation for saving His people. Every narrative, every teaching, every aspect of our Old Testament is nothing more than God’s preparation for salvation. Since the Fall it is God’s ultimate objective to redeem His people. He has been preparing a people (Israel) a land (Canaan) and a body of teaching (Prophets) leading up to the coming of Christ at Bethlehem.

The climax of God’s work in salvation, of course, has to be the very occasion that we are celebrate at Christmas. The Old Testament was a setting of the stage, as it were, a preparation for something much greater to come. And then the choosing of Mary with all the events surrounding the birth was the very climax. It is here that the real work of salvation really began.

At His birth Christ was given a new name. Whereas the title *“Christ”* means *“Messiah”*, or *“Anointed One”* showing that He is the appointed One of God, the name *“Jesus”* bore a special significance as it detailed His work. As God is the *“Saviour”*, so He sends His Son to do the Salvation work and gives Him the name *“Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins,”* (Matt 1:18).

This, of course, was only a beginning and we cannot stop merely at the birth, we have to continue the account, for we know that He was born to accomplish this great work of salvation. God is in the business of being a Saviour. He did not merely send His Son into the world to be a teacher, or leader, or significant figure in history. He had something more, something much greater in mind. *“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...”* 1 Timothy 1:15.

We have to come to the cross for He was born to die. The cross is the only way that God can deal with sin. Sin must be punished for the law states, *“the soul that sins shall die”* (Ezekiel 18). Christ becomes sin, He who knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), and bore the punishment and wrath of God for sinners. We read, *“the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 53:6). And again, *“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted”* (Isaiah 53:4). God is indeed a Saviour!

But God the Saviour did not leave Him dead. On the third day God raised His Son from the grave. Hence Paul can say, Romans 4:25 *“He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”* Or as Peter’s sermon as recorded in Acts 2:24 states, *“But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him”*.

Of course, the use of the word “save” must be a mystery to the average man in the street. What does such a word mean? Is this a word that is used in everyday speech? I once saw a poster that read, “*Jesus saves*”. Someone has scrawled underneath, “*with the Woolwich!*” I don’t think that this is what the Church meant by putting up that poster.

We would only use the term “save” in connection with a situation where someone has been rescued from a dreadful fatal situation. Perhaps someone fell into the sea and was pulled to safety. He would say he had been saved.

Well, the term “saved” has the same meaning in the Bible. Man is described as being in a serious situation. He is under the wrath of God; under His Divine judgement; only hell awaits him. Perhaps not a very nice thing to talk about at Christmas, but this is the truth.

In the Middle Ages there was a famous Archbishop of Canterbury named Anselm. He wrote a book entitled “*Why did God become Man*”. Whilst it was a book explaining the meaning of the incarnation it dealt with the atonement. Anselm’s point was that the reason why God become man was so that He could die on the cross. Christmas happened so that Easter could take place.

Christmas came about so that God could create an Easter. The cradle to the cross; the womb to the tomb! God intended Christ to be the Saviour, to save, rescue men and women from a serious danger. The danger was eternal death.

Did you know that if it was not for Easter there would never have been a Christmas! Christmas was the lead up to Easter; it was the preparation for Easter. God had Easter in mind when He instituted Christmas.

2. Mary and her personal Saviour: *God my Saviour*

Clearly, God is in the business of saving. Mary was right to say, “*God my Saviour*”. And yet, she adds something else to this statement that we must consider closely.

Mary uses the personal pronoun, “*my*”. This, you see, makes all the difference. This is why I believe that Mary was a person fully justified by faith. She could look upon God and confidently state, “*God my Saviour*”. He is not just “*The Saviour*” for Mary, because she had taken hold of God personally and through faith had made Him to be her God.

This is salvation. You will say, quite rightly, that salvation through faith comes when a person places their faith in *Christ* as Saviour. Yes, but we must recognise that for Mary this was pre-Calvary. She had to look to God in faith for Calvary, we will now look back to Calvary and place our faith in Christ.

You see, Mary could not have been born perfect and sinless for she is here declaring her need of a “*Saviour*”. If there was such a teaching as the “*Immaculate Conception*” Mary would not need a Saviour.

The question we must ask this Christmas is this. Can we say that Christ in our Saviour? Can we say that through Christ we have been brought to God our Saviour? Can we use the personal pronoun? It has been said that evangelical Christianity is all about personal pronouns. It is not made up of vague terms like “*the*”, or “*an*”, or “*Him*”. It is all about being able to say, “*He is my Saviour*”.

Let me tell you a story. There was once a shepherd and his son. The son was very young and his father was training him to be a shepherd. But he was also telling him about the Gospel. One Christmas Eve the father was telling his son about the Christmas story and in order to emphasize to his son that he needed to make a personal commitment to Christ, he used the words from our passage, *“my soul rejoices in God my Saviour”*.

Holding his hand up he counted his five fingers, *“rejoice in God my Saviour”*. When he came to the fourth finger he held on to this finger for emphasis, *“my”*. He told his son that when he had repented of his sins and committed himself to Christ he would be able to hold this fourth finger and say with joy, *“my”*.

Later that night a severe snowstorm arose and the father became anxious for the safety of his sheep. He knew he would have to venture out into the night. His son pestered to be allowed to come and eventually overcame the father’s reluctance.

As they searched in the snow for the sheep the blizzard increased severely and became so strong that the father and son became separated. Fearing the worse, the father searched all night for his child. Eventually he came upon a sight that he dreaded most of all. There, in a snowdrift, lay the frozen body of his son. As tears of sadness ran down his cheeks he noticed something that brought a distinct ray of joy and hope to his heart. There in the snow lay his son with his hand clutching hold of the fourth finger of his left hand. The father knew at in his dying moments his son had made Christ his own, personal Saviour.

3. Mary and her assurance of Salvation: *My soul rejoices in God my Saviour*

“A happy Christmas.....A merry Christmas”. We consider Christmas to be a time of rejoicing, happiness, fun, merry making etc, etc. This would truly be in keeping with the spirit of the very first Christmas itself. Mary here is depicted as *“rejoicing”*.

If you were asked to draw a picture of God I wonder what sort of face you would give him. Would He have a sad, miserable and austere face, or would you dare to give Him a happy face?

The impression many people have of God and Christianity is that it is dull, miserable, boring and most of all stern and strict. There is little room for joy, happiness and rejoicing in many people’s picture of Christianity.

Reading John Piper’s book, *“The Pleasures of God”* I have had to renew my view of God quite radically and begin to look upon Him as *“The Happy God”*. Piper takes as his starting point the words, *“the glorious gospel of the blessed God”* from 1 Timothy 1:11. Quite correctly, in my opinion, Piper translates the Greek phrase to: εὐαγγέλιον τῆς δόξης τοῦ μακαρίου θεοῦ to read, *“the glorious Gospel of the Happy God”*. He takes the word μακαριος (makarios) and shows that it really means *“happy”*.

If we consider the actual Christmas scene we do find that this theme of *“rejoicing”* runs through the story. For example, when the angels came to the shepherds they said, *“...I bring you good news of great joy”* (Luke 2:10); and then we are told that when the *“Wise men”* saw the star *“...they were overjoyed”* (Matthew 2:10), and then when Elizabeth visited Mary she told her to be *“happy”* for she said this to her, *“Blessed are you among women, (Luke 1:42).*

The New Testament (and the Old Testament) is full of the significance of Christian *“joy”*. Each of the opening phrases of the Beatitudes which begin with the word *“blessed”*, (Greek μακαριοιJ makarios) meaning *“happy”*. You must read it thus, *“Happy are the poor in spirit....happy are the pure in heart....”*. In fact Paul believed that the essence of the Kingdom

of God was joy when he said, *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”* (Romans 14:17).

There is not, in my view, any joy to be found in *“religion”* The mere performance of ritual, ceremony and rite does not produce joy and happiness. But there is rejoicing in knowing Christ as *your* Saviour.

For anyone engaged in social work, or working with families of any kind, know that Christmas time can be a turbulent period creating much unhappiness for some folk. Those that work with the Samaritans and Relate (i.e. counselling broken marriages) know that it can be a time of depression and unhappiness for many families. Families are forced together at Christmas time, thinking that Christmas time is for relatives and family friends to come together who would normally have nothing to do with each other during the rest of the year. It is a time of deep financial spending, materialism gone mad. Alcohol flows freely, parties turn into rape, high expectations are unmet with over indulging that can lead to stresses of all kinds. All this is focused into one single week in the year. Relate will tell you that on average there is a higher percentage of marriage break down during this period of the year than at any other period in the year.

For some, Christmas is highly overrated. It is like the blowing up of a balloon and then after Christmas it is like letting go of the balloon and watching it rapidly exhaust its air until it becomes a soggy lump of plastic.

Why do I say this? To be realistic. Whilst Christmas for many will turn out to be much less than expected, Christianity provides more than one can ever imagine. The rejoicing that comes from being a Christian is not like the short-term joy of a Christmas morning or party. Rather it is the long lasting enjoyment that comes from knowing that you are now right with God, sins forgiven and peace with heaven.

4. Mary and her spiritual experience of Salvation: *My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour*

Christianity is a *“heart faith”*. The essence of it is the response of the heart. The other day I heard someone speaking about another person and said, *“she understands with her mind but her heart says something different”*. We all know what we mean when someone says, *“her heart is really in this”*. Or when we say about another person, *“he is really passionate about it”*. With such expressions we talk about a person’s wholehearted commitment to something, they are absorbed with it, really involved.

Now this is what we mean when talk about a person’s commitment to Christ. By becoming a Christian it takes the heart, not just the mind, to believe. It means to look upon Christ as the sacrifice for sins and the need to be made right with God as the most serious matter in one’s life. Taking Christ is not like taking a Christmas present with its initial excitement that often dies when the novelty wears off. It has to be the most serious and important decision ever made. It requires the mind to accept and believe but the heart, with its own sensitivity, to feel the need of a Saviour from sin.

Paul wrote to the Romans and said, *“... if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. With the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”* Romans 10:9-11. This is New Testament Christianity.

Conclusion

Let end as we started. We began by speaking about Mary. There is not much told about Mary within the Gospel narratives apart from the birth stories and the odd mention of her in the Gospels. She seems to fade from the scene.

However, we do encounter her again at the beginning of Acts. In the first chapter we are told that about 120 people were all gathered together in prayer waiting for the out pouring of the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised. Whilst Luke does not name any of those within this group he does take the trouble to identify Mary, "*These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers*", Acts 1:14.

Why does Luke mention Mary within this group? I would suggest that he is seeking to show three things. In the first place that Mary herself (and her other children) was saved by faith just like any other Christian. Secondly, that Mary was not to be credited with any superior significance above other believers. She is merely one of a crowd. Following this episode Mary is not mentioned anymore in the Acts. Thirdly, to show that Mary's faith continued and matured. Mary is shown as one coming to faith in "*God her Saviour*" but now she is seeking earnestly to be filled with the Spirit.

The point I am seeking to make is that faith in Christ is but the beginning. Christian faith must mature and one must "*go on with Christ*". Let me put it like this. Christianity is not just for Christmas it is for life!

Many people come to Church at Christmas thinking that this occasional religious action means that they are a Christian. Some go even further and go to Church more regularly and even say some prayers. Others are more committed to their Church and are full of religious activities. But this does not make a Christian neither does it show that you are a Christian.

Christianity is not just for Christmas – it is for life! Let me go further and say that Christianity is life. It is not a hobby, an interest, or a past time. When a person becomes a Christian Jesus becomes Lord. He enters in and controls, orders and changes your life. Your life becomes Christ. Paul would say, "*for me to live is Christ*".

Richard Lee
