

Sermon for the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary



**Sermon preached by the
Rt Rev Dorsey McConnell
Assisting Bishop,
Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney
at the Pro-Cathedral of
Saint Mary the Virgin
on the Eve of their Patronal Festival,
August 14, 2022**

Text: The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

Manifestations of Mary

My most gracious Queen, my hope, Mother of God, shelter of orphans, intercessor of travelers, strangers and pilgrims, joy of those in sorrow, protectress of the wronged, see my distress, see my affliction! Help me, for I am helpless. Feed me, for I am a stranger and pilgrim. And from your strength, give me strength, for the love of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, now and forever. Amen.

This prayer is based on the final collect of the *Akathist*, the great Orthodox hymn to the Theotokos, the Mother of God. It means a great deal to me now, but I did not grow up with it, or anything like it. In fact, I have been trying to recall when the Virgin Mary first came into view for me. I was raised a low-church Anglican, so she did not figure at all in weekly worship. She was, of course, a figure in Christmas pageants, but the role usually involved the older sister of one of my classmates. During rehearsal, she chewed gum and rolled her eyes, which made it difficult to take her seriously as the mother of our Lord.

But then we moved to France for a couple of years and, at the age of eight, I found myself dropped into a *lycée* in Paris. The language was foreign, the surroundings strange, and I felt homesick, lost, and out-of-sync. This was partly because many of my classmates were Catholic and spent their hours after school preparing for confirmation. One day, a boy next to me named Jean-Luc, opened his notebook, and out fell a little laminated paper card which I picked up from the floor. It was a picture of a young woman in splendid robes, surrounded by cherubs, a radiant nimbus behind her. I was fascinated. I studied it for several seconds before I handed it back to my companion. He smiled, surprised I didn't recognize her. "*C'est la Sainte Vierge,*" he explained. "*C'est la Mere de Jesus.*" The Blessed Virgin. The Mother of Jesus.

I was floored. I had no idea that Jesus' mother was Catholic, and a French Catholic at that! But I sensed—in the few seconds that I held her image—the kindness and power that radiated from her. I wanted to know more.

That Sunday, and many others thereafter, I kept my eyes peeled for anything similar to the picture I held. For the first time it seemed, I heard her name in the Apostles' Creed. I saw her tucked away near a side altar of the American Cathedral where we worshipped every week. I found her here and there in the stained glass, but those images were always disappointing. They made her seem merely human, even slightly bored, with a halo behind her that looked like a salad plate. This was not the Mary I had briefly held in my hands.

For that Mary was glorious. She shone with a virtue that I somehow immediately apprehended, a strange combination of peace and courage, innocence, and determination. And the most impressive thing about her was not all the golden light or the winged and naked babies floating around her (which I found frankly annoying); it was the fact that her delicate bare feet were standing on a dragon, a hideous dark-fanged beast gasping out its last breath. She had crushed Satan and hadn't even broken a sweat. If she could do that, I thought, then maybe she could help me deal with the shadows that were beginning to fill my own heart. If she could defeat the powers of Hell, then surely she could comfort a sad little boy in a foreign land.

So, from that moment on, I became Mary's friend, and she mine. My devotion was secret. I came across a rosary somewhere, and took to wearing it around my neck, covered by my shirt. Awake sometimes in the night of a Parisian winter, I would speak with her. That Christmas, at the service of lessons and carols, when I heard the Dean read the words from the prologue to John, about the *light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*, I knew he was speaking not only of Christ the Word made flesh, but of Mary whose flesh he was. And while I never prayed to her, at least not the way my French classmates did, I was always grateful for her company. Somehow, helped by her and her son, and with a good deal of heavy lifting from my own mother, I made it through those childhood years in France and later learned to count them as a blessing.

Eventually, my devotion to her cooled, but she has never been far away from me. It is quickened at every evensong, every recitation of the Magnificat. I have learned that all that I saw in those few seconds in a French schoolroom, her peace and courage, her innocence and determination, is contained in her song. I remember, especially, her gaze, fixed in the mid distance, looking just over my shoulder, as though at something or someone just entering her field of vision. She is seeing the arrival of the world she sings about, which is why her song speaks of it as though it were already accomplished. *"The Lord has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and meek. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty."* And above all, this: *"He remembering his mercy has come to the help of his servant Israel, as he promised to our forebears."*

Even as I hear the words now, I cannot get over their boldness. Just like the song of Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel, Mary's song speaks of these things, not as a distant hope, not as the longed-for Day of the Lord, somewhere down the road, but as here and now. We should wonder about that. Is she blind to the reality around her: the oppression of Roman occupation, the precariousness and brevity of life in first century Palestine, the suffering of the poor—and most of her world is poor. And yet the world she describes is rich, full, peaceful, and just. How could she say such things? How could she believe them?

I have heard many explanations for this. Some have called it poetic license, a literary exaggeration, a conventional mode for prophetic utterance, but I don't buy any of this. Mary speaks of this world as real, as present, because for her it is. She carries in her flesh the mystery of the Incarnation, but her eyes are fixed on the Resurrection. Her son, not yet born, is in this moment for her, already raised, raised from the dead, and the world—the cosmos—is raised with him. In the moment that God enters history in the Word Made Flesh, the Redemption is guaranteed, and in a sense, accomplished. What will happen in a few years, early on a certain Sunday morning, the world that will be brought into being in the moment of Christ's rising— that moment will reach backward to the beginning of Creation and forward to the Day of the Lord, until all time is consumed in it, all matter transformed, all sin redeemed, all tears wiped away, all that is mortal, swallowed up by life. Mary sees this world now, shimmering in expectation just under the surface of things, and she knows God has won. So, she sings of it, as though it were present, because it is.

Surely what is true of Christ's mother must be true of His bride, of us the Church? Do we believe Satan has been crushed under our feet? Do we see the world of the Resurrection that is with us even now? Or are our eyes so focused on our trouble that we cannot see our hope?

I am under no illusion regarding the pain we face, in this diocese. I have read the articles, seen the tearing of the fabric of Christ's body, heard the malice and the rage, and felt with you the sadness that on some days seems to seep into every corner of life. Mary knows all this well, from her own personal experience. This is the landscape at the foot of the Cross, the sword that Simeon promised her, that would pierce her soul. Why should we be surprised that it now has pierced ours? But perhaps God of His mercy is turning all of this into a gift, a gift that has been given to us now because, as Church, we have floated too far for too long above the world's pain to be able to fulfill our calling as the embodiment of Christ's compassionate heart for the world. Suppose that, in the economy of God, the crucible we are now enduring will so re-form the soul of our church that we will *as Church* trust Him once again, trust his love once again, with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, so that we can see what Mary sees—the world in front of our eyes, raised from the dead. Perhaps we will finally resolve to walk together so patiently and deeply in the world's sorrows, that we will once again win the right to speak credibly of heaven's joys. And as we learn to do that, I believe Mary will reveal herself to us in ways that will change our lives.

Over forty years ago, when we were young people in New York City struggling with our faith, Betsy and I went to church at Saint Mark's in the Bowery. It was a tough neighborhood. The priest was a strong pastor and community activist, and the building had been completely reconfigured—pews removed, chairs arranged in a semi-circle with the altar in the middle, a slightly larger but simple chair for the celebrant, and another for the preacher. It was a Sunday early in Eastertide. It was a bright spring day, there were flowers everywhere, but I was anxious. I wasn't sure I wanted to be there. I was feeling a little superior to the others in the room, and a little afraid of them. I was skeptical about what I was hearing, and at the same time, desperate for it to be true. I was also hoping that this beautiful girl with whom I was increasingly in love, would love this, even though I wasn't sure I loved it. (It was complicated!) We stood for the reading of the Gospel, which was the prologue to John, and we sat down again. The priest said, "*Our preacher, Angela, is running a little late this morning, but she'll be here shortly.*" So, we waited for a few minutes.

Suddenly, from the side door, a young woman entered, out of breath and disheveled, with two Alsatians in hand. She sat down in the preacher's chair, and the two dogs sat by her, one on either

side, like guardian beasts, gazing up at her. She looked like she had had a rough night, her eyes were red, she was very thin, flustered, she stammered and fidgeted. And I was upset. I had not been counting on a homily from an addict, but when I looked at Betsy, her face was placid, she was even smiling a little. She was just taking it all in, so I relaxed and tried to listen.

Finally, our preacher had collected herself and said something like this: *“I’m really sorry to be late. I had a whole talk I was going to give, and I wrote it all out, but I couldn’t find it this morning. So, I’ve just got to say that the only thing I remember, is that line about Jesus the Light who shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it—that is completely true. He is true. Because if he weren’t I’d be dead by now, and if He is true for me, then he can be true for you.”* And here she looked straight at me, straight at all of us, and something in me gave up fighting, and I put myself in Christ’s hands.

Afterward Betsy and I sat under a park bench in the cool air and warm sunshine, under the enormous blossoms of a tulip tree. In front of us two homeless men were warming themselves over a fire they had started in a trash barrel—and the conjunction of the sadness and the beauty broke my heart. Betsy had been very quiet, and when she spoke, she simply said, *“You know, I think I have always believed.”* And from then on, we both did, and have ever since.

I have thought of Angela so many times over the years, of how I was tipped over the edge into the world of new life by this brave young woman. I see her in my mind’s eye, in all her sadness and hope, her courage and determination, standing with her feet on the dragon, her devoted Alsatians like cherubs by her side. And I believe Mary is still out there, waiting for us, just around every corner, inviting us to see what she sees: this world raised from the dead, the proud scattered, the hungry filled, the lowly lifted up. And her world can be our world, if we will walk where she walks, and know what she knows: that Christ is risen, the battle is won, and Satan beaten down under our feet. As we are reshaped by Christ’s Cross, may we become more ready to be heralds of Christ’s Kingdom, ready to be Mary for others, that they may share his life and her joy now and in the age to come. Amen.