

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on the third Sunday of Advent, in year B, 11 December 2011. To God be the glory.

In order for this sermon to make sense I have to take a little informal poll. I'm going to ask four questions, one of which should apply to most of us:

1. Okay... raise your hand if your religious roots extend as far east as Rome or Istanbul—how many of you come from a Roman Catholic or Orthodox background?
2. Now, for those of you who were baptized in or otherwise would say you grew up in the Episcopal Church, raise your hand.
3. Good. If you were reared in one of those several other Protestant denominations— Presbyterian? Congregational? United Methodist? Baptist? Lutheran? Society of Friends? Any other Protestant denomination not yet mentioned?
4. How many of you come from none of these backgrounds? Thank you.
[Guestimate how many from each question]

We turn to a piece of scripture today [that we didn't hear read, but sung by the choir, in that glorious arrangement of the Magnificat, from the first chapter of Luke. It's appointed for today--every year on this Sunday in place of the psalm. But what about Mary?

My own experience was limited to a white and blue statue of her made by my maternal Grandmother in a ceramics class at the local VFW hall. The statue was carefully brought out each spring, and my mother would place "her" underneath a half-sawed claw-foot bathtub which permanently resided on the side lawn, and around which my mother would plant various annuals and perennials.

For those of us who grew up Christian, our experience with Mary, our comfort in celebrating this Rose Sunday, depends largely upon our background in the faith. For my own part--coming from a more Protestant end of things--I've spent far more time "protesting" Mary than I have affirming her role in, or learning about, how she has shaped our faith and informed our conscience.

What I've come to understand, slowly and somewhat stubbornly, is that honoring Mary doesn't diminish my worship of God; in fact, doing so makes it all the richer. What makes some of us uncomfortable, I think, is the sugar-coating which takes her role out of its human proportion and tinsels it with quasi divinity. She must shudder at the attempt.

Yet she is the means of the incarnation. This woman--gifted and humble--bears grace, and she musn't be relegated to medieval adoration, nor can we limit her gift to the Roman Church or to orthodoxy. And if she's merely a character in our pageants then we miss an opportunity to affirm her call and her response to that

call. ¹

Mary, is the mother not only of Jesus, but also of our vocation--of our calling as well. She shows us that we're the gifted ones with her, and she equips us--as all the saints do--to be bearers of Christ in the world. Her titles and monuments, even the statues on the front lawns, they have a place, not because of what we do with her, or even because of what she does for us, but because of what God has done in her for us.

This song which she sings, set to countless pieces of music, sung at every Evensong in all those English Cathedrals in which lies our heritage, is a song of praise and a song of action; a song of poignant joy and cautious expectation.

Notice though that she doesn't sing in private. Instead, she shares it all with another woman, her cousin, Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. And the whole thing echoes a theme which rings through the entire Bible: God turns things upside down. An insignificant woman in an insignificant town births the Messiah.

They're a mother's words, and they come from a woman who exhibits formidability, showing us a way to hear and to believe, to ponder and to keep a promise. All of this ought to raise questions for us—universally—questions which might well move us. Questions such as, “How rich have I been today? How full of myself have I acted? Am I too full to recognize my need and hunger? Am I so haughty that I can't admit my need to help others? Am I too busy to know a blessing when it looks me right in the face? Our answers might depend upon a large measure of Mary's wisdom.

So there's a lot of room in Mary. You can go to her when you're overjoyed because she knows about rejoicing. This third Sunday of Advent, when we light the pink candle, is supposedly the Sunday for joy, and many of us do feel joy today. Mary is for us. But on this so-called Rose Sunday even if we're not feeling especially joyous, we too can turn toward that pink candle for Mary stands with all of us for whom joy is absent. One woman who has now buried three of her four children, said to me, “I love Mary because she knows what it's like to lose a child.” An old Parsee woman in India proudly shows a visiting nun her little shrine to Mary and says, “I'm not a Christian, but I love her.”

With those women perhaps we'll finally know that every song of the future, harmonizes with Mary's, which is why we ask her to sing again, and for her to teach it to us. Sing to us of your God, Mary, till your song at last becomes ours. Sing, till all the world hears you and we make your song our own.

¹ From the late Peter Gomes, Minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University in his article, “What about Mary the Mother of our Lord?” in the *Christian Century*, December 7, 1995.

In the end remember that she makes no claim for herself; she never did. But she does say something. The words are both defining and inviting, and they're hers. She opens her arms to us every time we celebrate the Eucharist, and she says, as only Mary can, "this is my body, this is my blood."