

MARY MOTHER OF GOD

YEAR A

How we think about motherhood will depend first of all on our experience of our own mothers. Then those who become mothers themselves will add that personal experience of giving birth and bringing up children to their earlier assumptions. In most cultures motherhood is held in high respect. There is an awareness that we not only begin our lives totally dependant on our mothers, but we also go through most of our lives with an assumption that our mother will always be there for us. Mothers stand for home and security and love, even when they struggle to live up to such an ideal, and they are often taken for granted for their pains. Without this bedrock of support, both families and societies fragment and lose their way. However, our contemporary Western culture is less happy to define women by their motherhood. Women should have the right to explore the full potential of their gifts and not be judged solely by this one role, important as it may be. In practice this results in many women being caught up between the demands of job and home, particularly if they are bringing up children without a father. There is an urgent attempt to share the responsibilities for bringing up children. Men are asked to take on tasks they would not have shared in the past. But women still hold the pivotal role in this new search and usually most of the burden.

In Luke's account of the infancy of Jesus, it is Mary who plays the central role in accepting God's invitation to become the mother of his Son. It could almost be said that Joseph is present only by association, first of all as the man to whom Mary is betrothed, and then, after the birth of Jesus, he is called Jesus' father. It is in Matthew's Gospel that his role is more clearly outlined. The angel of the Lord appears to him three times, but on each occasion it is to instruct him what to do rather than elicit his personal response. It is with Mary that God, as it were, puts the whole plan of salvation on the line, awaiting her "yes" so that the mystery of our redemption can begin to unfold. Mary's simple acceptance is the key. As a result the greatest story ever told begins, and she finds herself taken into the heart of its mystery. Down through the ages theologians have argued about how much Mary knew of her Son's nature and destiny. The tendency today, given a closer examination of our scriptural sources, would be to argue for less knowledge and more faith on her part. Certainly her encounters with her son, both as a youngster lost in the Temple and later when engaged in his public life, point to uncertainty. This is also suggested by the way she both

treasures and ponders what happens at his birth. Mary's final appearance in the Scriptures is with the apostles at prayer in the early part of the Acts of the Apostles. Her role seems to be that of the one who contemplates, considers and holds in her heart all that happens. Her receiving of God's word continues throughout her son's life and beyond.

We live in a world where actions speak louder than words. We are measured by our achievements in terms of what we produce. Do we get good exam results? Do we get good jobs? Do we get good houses, cars and all the material goods that are signs of success? And yet we are apparently no happier than when we had none of these. Mary's act of acceptance released the most profound change in our human existence, but what followed in her life was more contemplative than active. She did not presume to control the story that was unfolding. She had to deal with the strange demands and behaviour of her son. Her response to such demands was one of profound inner reflection. We who have been asked to unite with her son in our lives will benefit from following her example, particularly at this time of year, as we think about starting anew and tackling areas of life we need to change. Very often our best intentions come to nothing because they are based on little more than wishful thinking. All our rushing around will be to no avail if we have not centred ourselves reflectively on the heart of the mystery we celebrate. We too need to treasure all these things and ponder them in our hearts.