

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY



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ABOUT MARY

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FRIENDLY
CONVERSATION

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AM I NOT YOUR
MOTHER?

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BOOK REVIEW : *NINE
PARTS OF DESIRE*

Christine Bradbeer



Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

Christmas is coming around once more. It is a time of great significance for Christians - a time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

An aspect of this occasion that many Protestants, at least, neglect is that for Jesus to have been born, it was necessary for a woman to carry him and then give birth. That woman was Mary. This neglect is born out of the historical debate between Catholics and Protestants over the significance of Mary, with Protestants disapproving the cult status many Catholics attribute to her. For example, some Catholics claim eternal virginity for Mary, whereas the Bible says that Jesus had (younger) brothers.

Our understanding of Mary often does not get past her giving birth, and receiving visitors in the stable afterward. This image of the Madonna and Child is frequently depicted in Medieval art, commercial Christmas cards and nativity scenes. The Bible, however, says a bit more. The gospels show a woman willing and obedient to serve her God, in the face of something that both appeared impossible and could have led to shame. She featured in Jesus' life apart from his birth, being present at the foot of the cross (Matthew 27:56), perhaps being one of the first to witness Jesus' resurrection (Matthew 28:1), and being among the disciples after Jesus' ascension to heaven (Acts 1:14).

This issue of ishah focuses on the Biblical presentation of Mary, as well as some cultural representations, which are often quite different from those in the Bible. The authors explore various aspects of Mary's character and faith, as depicted in the birth narrative, and consider what we as Christian women may have to learn from her. This issue also provides some helpful ideas as we navigate the consumer-driven, secular version of Christmas.

Have a joyful Christmas celebrating the birth of Jesus and what that meant for the world, then and now.

The Editors

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1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.

2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.

3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.

4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

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There's something about Mary...

BY COLLEEN ARNOLD-MOORE

As you wander down the street you catch a glimpse, through an open window, of a woman. She moves calmly and gracefully, yet you recognize her strength, perhaps even her patience. When we consider Mary the mother of Jesus, we have a similar glimpse. The window we glance through is in first century Judea, yet we are still struck by her character, her gracefulness, her strength. We know that even with this briefest of views, there is something about Mary.

Our picture of Mary may be determined not only by our religious or cultural backgrounds but also by representations in media, film, art and literature. Perhaps the most prevalent view today of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is found on Christmas cards. She is invariably pictured as quiet and compliant, attired in blue and either heavily pregnant (often seated on the ever-ambling donkey), or as the adoring mother basking in the radiance of the Christ-child. Yet these images remain as one-dimensional as do cartoon pictures of Tweety and Sylvester. It is an image that makes Mary intangible, untouchable, an ideal woman beyond compare.

So what do we as Christian women make of these images? Do we accept that these popular images depict the real Mary? Do these aspects of womanhood that she is understood as typifying, in both her maiden state and her later motherhood, reflect godly characteristics or models of behaviour? So in what ways do we see this woman as a possible model for us?

Do these aspects of womanhood that she is understood as typifying, in both her maiden state and her later motherhood, reflect godly characteristics or models of behaviour?

to consider that her only importance was as the one who gave birth to Jesus. Clearly she is significant because of her relationship to God and her extensive role in the life of his son, Jesus. In order to understand her significance we must turn to the earliest record concerning both Mary and her son, and that is Scripture.

In order to grapple with the truth behind these images we must first consider what they depict. These cardboard cutouts only reveal the most obvious aspects of Mary's life and person by focusing on her role as the mother of the newborn Jesus. However, it would be a mistake

The Scriptural picture we are given of Mary is like that brief glimpse through a window. It is a glimpse that gives only a partial view of Mary, because the prime focus of Scripture is God. Yet the centrality of Mary to the incarnation of Jesus has meant that there are many later cultural accretions around her person and actions. In order to see Mary clearly, we need to revisit Scripture.

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Luke alone recounts the annunciation in his gospel.

Luke makes his intent in writing his gospel clear, for after much investigation, he has decided to give an orderly account [of the life of Jesus], so that Theophilus may know the truth of what he has been instructed (Luke 1: 3-4). His chronological account shapes his initial emphasis on the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth, (the parents of John the Baptist) and subsequently Joseph and his fiancée Mary and the divine conception of Jesus. We see a contrast between these two related families. Zechariah and Elizabeth are long married, past child-bearing years and Elizabeth is barren. They are also described as righteous before God. Joseph and Mary are young, not married but merely betrothed and living separately. No comment is made upon their status before God until Gabriel arrives.

The angel Gabriel is sent by God to Mary. This heavenly messenger has already set the story in motion by announcing to Zechariah and Elizabeth that they will have a son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:8-17). Zechariah, a priest, is terrified by the arrival of the angel while he is serving in the temple. Mary's response is one of curiosity and not fear at the greeting of the angel. She wonders what this announcement of God's favour could mean. This contrast should surprise us, because it is Zechariah, serving in the temple of the living God, who should be most willing to receive the heavenly messenger. Yet Mary is far more receptive.

The difference between Mary and Zechariah is even starker in their responses to God's promises. Zechariah does not believe the angel and is thus punished by being struck mute until he names his son John (Luke 1: 60). But Gabriel's breathtaking announcement to Mary, that

she (who had not known a man) would carry the son of the Most High God through the coming of the Holy Spirit is met by an astonishing agreement. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word." (NRSV Luke 1:48). This is despite the fact that Mary risks public condemnation and ostracism, unlike Zechariah who will find strong social affirmation in having a child. Mary also sees the fulfillment of the prophets in her child's role as the ruler of Israel, seated upon David's throne (Luke 1:32). In all these instances Mary's response is considered and obedient. She stands amongst few peers in Scripture in her willingness to obey God.

What understanding of Mary's character does this give us? Do we envy her obedience not only in contrast to Zechariah's but also to our own? Mary has assented to a future that could leave her ostracized from her society, yet this has not hindered her willingness to serve God. Often our willingness to serve the living God in far less radical situations is dictated by what we consider socially acceptable or appropriate. This is further highlighted by our own, unwilling acknowledgment of God's rule in our lives. Mary has grasped the sovereignty of God not as a theoretical reign but in its practical daily impact in her life for her to become the mother of the messiah. In all these ways our picture of Mary must be broadened beyond the images presented in popular culture.

Luke's narrative continues with Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Both women are pregnant and Elizabeth's declaration of the forthcoming birth of the Lord

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and his presence in her home is yet another indication of the special nature of their children. It is the first human affirmation of the promise of God and Elizabeth's recognition of the unborn Jesus as the Lord re-affirms the response Mary has made. Mary agrees that God has blessed her and her song

gives the glory to God. She identifies God's acts in the past and sees her coming Son as the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. This affirmation not only indicates her acceptance of the promises of God, but also clearly places her Son, Jesus, in the center of salvation history. So Mary and Elizabeth are the first to articulate faith in Jesus. Indeed, because the incarnation of Jesus, his life, death upon a cross, resurrection from the dead and

Mary stands as an extraordinary example and witness to God's saving acts in the person of Jesus.

ascension to heaven are at the centre not only of Christian faith but of all human history, Mary's response of faith to Jesus further deepens the picture we have of this amazing woman. The birth narrative is remarkably brief in contrast to the earlier detail. It begins with Mary and Joseph traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David, for the census and it is here that Jesus is born. We know nothing of the actual physical birth or Mary's response. Mary wraps the child in cloths and lays him in the manger (Luke 2:7). This guides the angel-sent shepherds to the child and they all glorify God. Mary's delight must have been even greater than that of new parents because of the circumstances of Jesus' conception. Not just Mary

but all of Israel had been anticipating this child for many centuries, for this is Jesus, the son of the Most High Lord who will save his people. Mary has responded with faith to the promises of God and they are fulfilled. She ponders all that has happened and treasures these things in her heart. These events: the annunciation, the visitation to Elizabeth, the birth of Jesus, have impacted her life and shaped her as a person.

The glimpse we have caught of Mary has far more solidity than the Christmas picture that dominates her popular image. Though we yearn to know more we have but a partial picture of Mary. She must have been a phenomenal woman. She conceived, carried and birthed the Messiah, and also mothered him, taught him to talk and walk, saw him grow to adulthood, teach, heal, die and then rise from the dead. Mary was not only involved in aspects of her son's ministry (such as the wedding at Cana in John 2) but is also with the post resurrection church when the Spirit comes with power (Acts 1:14).

Mary stands as an extraordinary example and witness to God's saving acts in the person of Jesus. Her life was characterised by her willingness to serve the living God. In this she is an exceptional model for all of us to step out and obey God in our lives. So it would seem that after all, there is something about Mary.

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Friendly Conversation

BY NICOLA TEMPLETON

I often meet my friend in one of the local parks. It gives us a chance to catch up while our children play. I mentioned Robson Green, an actor I thought rather good in *Mrs Jones*, a political romance/comedy I'd recently seen and my girlfriend told me that he was the same actor who had been starring in *Wire in the Blood* which she'd seen the UK. We talked about being privy to the criminal's mind or the investigating officers. I can't stomach the former - my friend, a nurse and less squeamish than I, finds the production realistic in its depiction of the underbelly of life.

Our conversation turned to reality TV and *Big Brother*, the show that first aired in Europe and America in 2000 and then across TV networks globally. The show features a group of people, who are strangers to one another, who move into a studio house and are then filmed continuously seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. Record ratings of viewers tune in nightly to watch the relationships unfold or crumble.

I asked my friend why she liked watching *Big Brother*. She said it wasn't that she liked it but rather got immersed in it because it would be on the TV when she returned from the hospital. She used it to unwind. In fact when pressed she said she loathed the show and often felt rather grubby



after watching. She said 'People in Britain just wanted to see if they shagged or not'.

Though I didn't watch *Big Brother*, I knew something of the show. In fact, when it first aired it was hard to avoid. Every night on the train after work, the free paper would provide a breakdown of where things were up to. People talked about the show in the office, gave their opinions, said what they thought about such and such. And that's pretty much how most mass communication and tie-in marketing works today. You get to know about something, even if you don't want to. Often this irritates us as Christians and we dismiss the particular fad as just that. But were we to turn it around and look at the thing face to face, we might see that the latest media hype presents great opportunities for evangelism.

St Paul talks passionately about 'our conversation in the world' in 2 Corinthians 1:12. He loved the Corinthian church greatly - though it was riddled with factions and people claiming different allegiances. 'One says I am of Paul, another I am of Apollos; another I of Cephas, and another I of Christ'. It is into this atmosphere that Paul finds people have misrepresented him, his words. Paul strongly defends himself when he says in verse 12 'that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward'. His word to the Corinthian church and non-believers in Asia is the 'testimony of our conscience'. He has not said anything that is a double-standard.

I wonder how often my words and language differs when I am in conversation with my friends. In talking with my friend in the park, have I said anything to her that I would be ashamed

to say to a believing friend? Do I speak of matters with unbelievers that I would never raise with believers? John Chapman in his book *Know and Tell the Gospel* says 'godliness is an essential tool for evangelism and evangelism is an essential tool for godliness.' He goes on to say 'Christ-likeness of character is the reason why God called us back to himself. It is what life really is all about. Christ-likeness is also essential if we are to engage in evangelism, and not display behaviour, which is at variance with the message.'

My friend and her family came to dinner tonight. She said, 'I ended up watching Robson Green on Friday night. He is good isn't he? But, I made a mistake,' she said, '*Wire in the Blood* isn't the series I saw in the UK, it was another one. I'm like you, I don't want to know all the gory details of how the murderer commits their crime; I'm much more interested in the investigative process of solving the crime. I find the darkness difficult to deal with.'

Later, reflecting on her comments, I am encouraged. I realise our views are not so different. Before bidding her goodnight I ask her if she wanted me to pick up her eldest son in the morning. 'Oh yes,' she says 'he loves coming to Sunday school.'

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Geraldine Brooks, (2002), *Nine Parts of Desire: the hidden world of Islamic women*, Random House, Sydney.

Nine parts of desire made its way to the top of my 'must read' list for three reasons: it was recommended by people whose judgment I value; I had enjoyed Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders*; and the title intrigued me.

This award-winning foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal* developed many personal and professional relationships with Muslim women. One of these women arrived at work one day dressed 'like a stranger...in the uniform of a Muslim fundamentalist.' In an effort to understand her, Brooks explores the early years of Islam, the lives of friends and colleagues, their countries, workplaces, and family homes. *Nine parts of desire* is an easy, but also challenging and disturbing, read.

Brooks wanted to conclude that the restrictions imposed on women by Islam are either not restrictions or cannot be attributed to Islam, and certainly not to the Koran. A Jew by conversion, Brooks has great respect for faith in general and for religions of the book in particular. She is comfortable applying sacred scriptures to contemporary situations. She respects belief that is sincerely practised and true to its origins, at least where those origins foster human dignity and freedom and contribute towards a society where women have the same rights as men to decide their choice of dress, relationships, course of study and career, and, even more fundamental, the right to determine how their bodies are treated.

Many of the women directly associated with Muhammad, including his wives, were free to study and run businesses. Brooks searches in vain for this freedom in most Islamic countries today. Islam, in its different manifestations, has moved far from this original freedom, failed to eradicate horrific cultural repression of women in areas where Islam holds sway, and has sometimes defended such practices from the Koran. Brooks is also able to go beyond the superficial and acknowledge apparent paradoxes: Iranian women, for all their enforced dress, may be the freest in the Islamic world.

In her effort to be fair Brooks does not exonerate Muhammad or the Koran from taking responsibility for some of the practices which most offend her. Many of Muhammad's pronouncements from God seem, to a non-Islamic mind, to be very convenient. 'Muhammad's increasing number of revelations about women seemed more and more influenced by the need to achieve tranquillity in his own household.'

As the world waits for a young woman in Nigeria to wean her child and then be stoned to death, in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, I dare to say that this book is essential reading. Christian women should be aware of what happens when men with religious authority claim the right to control every aspect of the lives of women. It must also be acknowledged that there are many cases, some before Australian courts, where practices by those claiming to be called to Christian ministry are as foreign to the teaching of Jesus Christ, as Islamic treatment of women in the twenty first century would have been to Muhammad.

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write of reply

ishah welcomes reader responses to topics dealt with in previous issues. These should be no more than 200 words long and can be emailed (to ishahmag@hotmail.com) or posted (to *ishah*, c/- 23 Bundoran Parade, Mont Albert North VIC 3129).

I want to encourage you as the last issue of *ishah* encouraged me.

Recently, I have been able to share with a few of my friends at work. I was so grateful that through your mag, God had prepared me first. I have been amazed at how interested some of my work friends have been in why I go to church on Sundays or a mid-week bible study. Asking questions like "have you always been a Christian" to "What made you become a Christian" have provided some great openings which I don't think I would have pursued as well had I not been prepared.

I am embarrassed to say that sometimes I avoid telling non-church friends about my faith and involvement with

church activities. It is sad that we feel so comfortable talking about God's love with other Christians and yet like Jonah we "run away" from opportunities to proclaim the truth to contemporary Ninevites. In a church culture where growth and numbers are often the measure of success I'm really challenged by the need to introduce new sheep rather than re-distribute the flock.

I'm still anxious about how I'll be received but I also have a conviction that God wants me to share and I do know that the peace and joy that I now know is because others shared with me and prayed for me.

Rebecca Johnson,
Brunswick, VIC

Am I not your Mother?

The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Women of Mexico.

BY KATHRYN FLETCHER

► The growth of a myth

Lord help us. Look at these your people. If you do not intervene, who will? Lift us from this hole, Little Mistress. We offer you everything we have:...the nopal cactus spines buried in our knees, our bleeding feet that betray kilometres of sorrowful jostling ... You favoured no other nation like ours, Little Virgin; you accompanied the liberator Miguel Hidalgo; you shine on bare walls and allow us to adore you in shops and garages, on the roads and on coaches, in the slum housing where we live... Lend us a hand – the minimum wage is a mockery, and they've just put up the price of petrol, tortillas and beans... (Monsiváis, 1997, p 37)

This 'litany' was written by a Mexican social commentator reflecting on popular Catholicism in Mexico. It reveals the Virgin of Guadalupe as the focus of popular zeal, to whom petitions are made because she understands the people's suffering.

I have witnessed numerous parades of pilgrims en route to worship at the sacred site where the Virgin is believed to have made her first miraculous appearance 500 years ago. She appeared to Juan Diego, a poor indigenous Mexican, demanding a temple be built in her honour and promising to protect 'her children', the native people of Mexico. What was distinctive about the apparition is that the Virgin appeared as an indigenous Mexican and identified herself not only as the 'Ever-Virgin, Holy Mary' but also as the 'mother of the God of Great Truth, Teotl' (the Nahuatl name of the Indians' ancient god). This provided the perfect breeding ground for the syncretism of native and Catholic religions. As Mexico grew into a mestizo society, Guadalupe came to epitomise both a religious and national identity for Mexicans.

Now, many say that 'Guadalupeism', not Catholicism, is the religion of Mexico. Perhaps ten percent of Catholics attend mass regularly, but images and shrines honouring Guadalupe are everywhere. Some years ago, a rich suburb in the south of Mexico City put up a wall to separate itself from a poor neighbouring suburb, creating lots of dead-end streets. On the poor side of the wall, these streets became centres for seedy activities but when the residents erected altars to the Virgin in each cul-de-sac, the streets were quickly cleaned up.

The Guadalupe myth is so strong that the Virgin supplants Jesus as the central figure of faith in popular Catholicism; there are even songs celebrating her as the 'redeemer'. Jesus is depicted as dependent on the Virgin's maternal care (Contreras, 1995). This partly explains why, in Mexican Catholicism, Jesus is seen primarily as a helpless baby in his mother's arms or as a corpse on the cross. His victory over death and his lordship over all are thus obscured.

► Myth and reality – the Virgin and Mexican women

Am I not here, I who am your Mother? Are you not under my shade? Am I not your wellbeing? Has not destiny placed you in my lap? What more do you need?

Guadalupe's words to Juan Diego emphasise her role as mother. She has been described as the 'archetype of femininity' (Contreras, 1995, p 7), and in particular of motherhood, especially among the poorer classes in Mexico. Many Mexican mothers look to the Virgin for dignity and hope in the midst of difficult lives. For example, it is common for husbands to be away working illegally in the US, perhaps sending part of their income to a second, illegitimate family. Meanwhile, their wives struggle to make ends meet through activities like growing corn in the country and selling tortillas in the city while bringing up a handful

of children. Such women identify with the Virgin's sufferings, and find comfort in their own difficulties. Indeed, one of the major religious celebrations here in Mexico takes place on the Friday before Good Friday, when Catholics remember Mary's suffering at the death of her son.

How are evangelicals to proclaim Jesus as Lord to those who worship the Virgin of Guadalupe? The biblical Mary must be presented as a woman who proclaimed God's faithfulness and served him without seeking personal glory - in contrast to Guadalupe, who demanded a temple be built in her honour. Christ must be presented as risen Lord. Christians need to emphasise the accessibility and graciousness of our heavenly Father, who promises to comfort his people as a mother comforts her child (Isaiah 66:13), and whom we can approach with boldness and intimately call 'Abba, Father' (Romans 8:15). The church also needs to encourage Christian models of femininity, affirming women in their various roles within the family, the church, and wider society. The fundamental challenge is to encourage Mexican women to look to Jesus of Nazareth, not the Virgin of Guadalupe, for their strength and hope.

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Christmas: Celebration, Contemplation & Compassion

BY FIONA McLEAN

In my approach to Christmas, I hope to celebrate this joyful occasion, to reflect on the meaning of Christmas, and to use the occasion to be compassionate and generous towards others. Here are some practical ways to do this:

Celebration

- > **Feast** - enjoy good food, given to us by our generous God! In Deuteronomy God commands his people to have a party, to thank him for his provision (Deut. 16: 10-15). Paul tells us that it is God "who richly provides us with everything to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17).
- > **Decorate** - use candles and decorations. Perhaps choose a different theme each year (e.g. crowns, stars, and angels) with which to decorate the house, and even as a focus for Bible readings.
- > **Give presents** - they are part of celebrating!

Contemplation

- > **Read aloud Scripture** focusing on the significance of Jesus. This can be done each day in December, perhaps at the evening meal, or during your quiet time.
- > **Get a tree** at the start of advent and add a decoration to the tree each day throughout December - maybe at the same time as the advent reading.
- > **Set up a nativity scene** and be prepared to explain it to non-Christians!
- > **Attend a carol service.**

Compassion

- > **Obtain a Samaritan's Purse shoebox** to be filled with small gifts for children overseas.
- > **Make use of the *Tear Really Useful Gift Catalogue*** when considering gifts for friends, family, work colleagues or children's teachers.
- > **Send Christmas cards** which have an illustration and words that actually communicate something about Jesus.
- > **Tell others about Jesus**, as this is the best way we can show compassion for them!

These ideas are largely taken from a discussion run by Jenny Moody and Jean Williams in late 2001.

Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

Living Dangerously

How many wise words did you hear in the days following the Bali bombing? Most seem simplistic, drawing swift conclusions, sensationalistic and cathartic. There has been no pause for numbness, or emptiness, no waiting for wisdom to be collectively brewed. I have felt both managed and sanitised by the media. I needed the one minute of silence the following Sunday to reflect. As Christians we need a biblically nuanced understanding of love, mercy, justice, violence, good and evil. We then need to see clearly the nature and agenda of the interested parties and apply these biblical truths carefully.

Let's hand out the black and white cowboy hats with care. Issues such as national identity, retribution, justice, the desire for safety, world order, preventative war and religious, political and economic freedoms are incredibly complex in a world that we don't actually control.

We are in shock, for those of us born after world war 2, who are not refugees, have never known such a threat to our way of life. We have never been terrorised. It's awful and it's evil, and it's not going to go away. We must persevere in what we know to be good and right, strong, true and just. Many people will give their lives whether through blood shed or years of patient work before we see stability in the non-western world, if ever. Who knows the impact it will have on the west itself. We were never meant to live just for ourselves: our career, our loved ones, our country, our next house or holiday. If a positive vision of change for a struggling non-western world did not engage us, perhaps, sadly, the terror will.

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