

Credo, 2nd Series, Part Six: “The Blessed Virgin”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for February 2nd 2020 (Fourth after Pentecost/Feast of the Presentation)
by Foster Freed

Luke 2: 22-38

I will acknowledge, up-front, that quite a few of you may be puzzled this morning: puzzled with what may appear, at first blush, to be a return to the very theme with which I dealt last Sunday. For those of you not here a week ago, my theme was Christmas: a reflection prompted by our having reached that point in The Apostle’s Creed where we learn that he...

...he, as in Jesus Christ...

...was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. And yes: to be fair. I most certainly could have chosen to bring this second series of sermons on The Apostle’s Creed to a close with last Sunday’s Christmas-themed sermon. That is certainly the choice my theological “hero”—Karl Barth—would have made (and, in fact, did make) when he unpacked the Creed. In truth: Barth would heartily disapprove of what I am embarked upon this morning, as I add a sixth sermon to the five I have already preached on this section of the Creed. But I do so...

I do so, at least in part, prompted by the fact that the Creed chooses to speak of Christ’s extraordinary birth not merely by naming the participation of the Holy Spirit, and not merely by mentioning his virginal conception in an abstract sort of way, but chooses rather to name...

...goes to the trouble of naming the specific person—the particular human being—whom it credits with having given birth to Christ. Consider!

Consider that the Creed, having made it clear that to speak of Jesus Christ is to speak of someone who shares our humanity but is not fully defined by our shared humanity...consider that it then goes on to incorporate—in its **brief** presentation of the Christian faith—the names of only two other human beings. One of those others, a man by the name of Pontius Pilate, is someone to whom we’ll have no choice but to return when we draw closer to Holy Week. Stay tuned: Pilate will most definitely get his turn—his unfortunate turn—in the spot-light. But the other...the other human being named in the Apostle’s Creed is Mary: the Virgin Mary which—at a bare minimum—is a title by which to distinguish her from the handful of other Mary’s who play parts in the story of Jesus. And yes: I find it worth pausing to consider her place of honour in the Creed, especially when you consider all of the others who are not named. No mention of the Apostles, Peter or Andrew, James or John. No mention of the Evangelists, Matthew or Luke, Mark or John. No mention of the other women, some of whom appear—at times—to play more prominent roles (and happier roles) in Jesus’ life, than the role Mary at times seems to play. And yes! At the end of the day...

...I believe that we should not pass over the Creed's allusion to Mary in silence, simply folding that allusion into the Christmas story. I personally believe that there is more at play in Mary's presence here: a belief I share knowing full well that my doing so is not a conventional Protestant belief, even in a Protestant church which has shared a worship-space with a Roman Catholic parish for over 40 years, although the fact that **their** statue of the Blessed Virgin is on wheels so that it can be conveniently rolled into the back room during **our** worship services, tells its own intriguing story! Then again!

I recall a time when I preached a similar sermon while still at Knox Church in Parksville: a sermon in which I sought (as I will seek to do this morning) not to bury The Blessed Virgin but to praise her. After that service a retired United Church Minister in the congregation approached me with a mischievous smile. He said to me: "Foster, one day a miracle is going to take place in this church." I was puzzled: "What do you mean a miracle will take place?" He answered: "One day you are going to discover Protestantism, and amazing things will happen."

* * * * *

Reflecting on that wonderful remark, many years down the road, the irony—I have come to realize—is that my own appreciation of Mary **is** highly Protestant! Highly Protestant in that I tend to be highly selective in my personal appropriation of the honouring of Mary: an honouring that is so much a part of the life of Orthodox Christians, many Anglican Christians, but is especially identified with the life of the Roman Catholic Church. And so, to cite a handful of examples. I am, for starters, far from comfortable with the teaching of Mary's "perpetual virginity": the teaching that she remained a virgin throughout her life. Why, my discomfort? Partly because it seems un-Biblical: flying in the face of the statement found in Matthew's Gospel, to the effect that Joseph did not have intimate relations with Mary **until after the birth of Jesus**, suggesting that after Christ's birth they were intimate. That's part of my discomfort, but frankly I also fear that an insistence upon Mary's perpetual virginity subtly—and perhaps not so subtly—suggests that there is something inherently unworthy about human sexuality, a suggestion that I think can do and has done considerable damage.

I am also uneasy with claims about Mary's Immaculate Conception: a claim, incidentally, which has nothing to do with the Virgin Birth, but represents an additional teaching which claims that Mary—from the start—was preserved from Original Sin. My concern with that, is that it seems to render Mary less than fully human...and that too is something I find problematic.ⁱ Finally—there is a sense in which Catholic piety at times gives the impression that Mary is to be placed on the same level as Jesus: with devotion to Mary seeming, a times, to supplant devotion to Christ. Many years ago I met an exchange student from China who told me that folks in China—at least at the time—would differentiate between Protestants and Catholics by labelling Protestants as those who worship Jesus, and labelling Catholics as those who worship Mary. That cannot help but raise my Protestant suspicions. And yet.

As so often seems to be the case with us Protestants. In our hurry to dispose of the bathwater, we have a tendency either to dispose of the baby—or worse still—to drown the baby. Which is why I am pleased that our own era is witnessing something of a softening of the Protestant churches' stance where Mary is concerned....and why—especially on February 2nd, which just happens to be a Festival Day honouring Christ's Presentation in the Temple, I am only too happy to direct our attention to the Mother of our Lord.

* * * * *

Very well. For starters go no further...no further than the appointed Gospel reading for this Feast, a feast held each year 40 days after Christmas. Let's be clear! This reading—from the 2nd chapter of Luke—is first and foremost a **Jesus** story: a story in which the One brought to the Temple by Joseph and Mary is once again revealed to be no ordinary infant, but the Christ. Nevertheless, any temptation we may have to regard Mary as merely part of the window-dressing for this beautiful Gospel vignette goes right out that window when Simeon, the old Man who has waited his whole life to behold God's salvation and now not only beholds it but enfolds him in his arms...

...any sense that Mary is a mere bit player in this small Temple drama goes out the window when Simeon—having told Mary that the infant Christ *is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel*—then addresses a deeply personal word to her, words that are almost impossibly horrible, words no mother wishes to hear: *and a sword will pierce through your own soul also*. What I find so poignant—but also so significant about that moment in Luke's Gospel—is how it ties together the role Mary plays at the start of Christ's life with the role she will go on to play at the end of his life. That, in turn, explains why the real title I wish to bestow on Mary this morning is the title "Disciple"...better still: "**First** Disciple"! Long before she had been awarded any of the titles by which she is better known—Blessed Virgin, Holy Mother, Immaculata...

...long before any of those titles became current, the one title to which surely no one would begrudge her is the title Disciple, the title of "First" Disciple. Consider! Consider that by the time Mary stands with her infant child in the Temple, she has already encountered the angel Gabriel who offered her the possibility of bearing the Christ-childⁱⁱ: a possibility to which she offered a heart-felt "yes", a "yes" that should be considered no less momentous than the "yes" voiced by Andrew and Peter, James and John, when Christ called out to them by the lakeside. Consider, as well, that Mary—by the time she brought Christ to the Temple—had already withstood Joseph's initial suspicionsⁱⁱⁱ, that in the presence of her cousin Elizabeth she had given voice to the stirring Song of Faith we know as the Magnificat^{iv}, and that she had journeyed with her husband to birth Jesus not in the familiar environs of her home-town Nazareth, but in the barnyard behind an inn in the city of Bethlehem^v. And yes: while it is true that these Christmas stories tend to be central to Protestant remembrance of Mary, the fact remains: her discipleship does not end with the story of Christ's conception and birth. Mind you...much like the male disciples, she appears at times not to know what to make of her son: at one point appearing to earn his rather sternly worded rebuke.^{vi} And yet—at the end—**unlike** all of the male disciples with the exception of John, Mary can be

found at the foot of the Cross: a witness to her son's execution....and subsequently a witness to his burial.^{vii} Mercifully, she was also there when the good news of Easter burst forth three days later^{viii}, and there again when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the ancient Church.^{ix} She was a disciple...in a very real sense the **first** disciple. Long before Andrew and Peter, long before the sons of Zebedee, Mary was there. Is it really so surprising that Christians have sought to honour her over the centuries? And yet: does any of that justify the outsized role she continues to play in the piety of so many Christians?

* * * * *

Let's come at it like this. When push comes to shove, I suspect that very few of us—Protestants though we be!—have any difficulty seeing in Mary a Biblical figure deeply to be admired...indeed a Biblical figure we may even choose to regard as a role model since we too (in our own time and place) yearn to be filled with Christ much as Mary permitted herself to be filled with Christ. All the same...we may well find ourselves questioning the centrality of the place she occupies in Catholic piety: where she is not only an object of intense devotion, but one to whom the faithful are encouraged to turn as an intercessor, one whose prayers are sought above all others.

And you know: when push comes to shove, I guess I can do nothing more than share with you what remains—for me—the most persuasive argument I have ever heard in favour of the possibility that the seemingly “over-sized” role imagined for Mary is a role that was not simply made up by Christians afflicted with “over-sized” imaginations. It has to do with the Fifth Commandment: Honour your father and mother. Even a cursory glance at any one of the four Gospels reveals the zeal with which Jesus honoured his Father...his Father in heaven. Is it possible that he is equally zealous about honouring his mother? That it is actually Jesus' idea to honour the one I have been describing as his “first disciple” and to do so in precisely the way Jesus seems to go about honouring anyone he seeks to honour: by giving them work to do, in the case of Mary, the work of intercession, the costly work of praying for those who—having come to know Jesus as their brother—eventually discover (as an added bonus) that they have Mary as their mother. Bringing to her their joys and concerns in the hope that she might intercede on their behalf: not as something they **must** do but as something that they **may** do. This is a “getta” not a “haveta”! And I must tell you!

Having earlier stated my anxiety that there are forms of Catholic piety that appear to hand Mary a more central place than that occupied by her Son, I also have to say—and as a father this pains me to acknowledge—there are times when children need their mom and no substitute will do. Oh yes: much of the time my four are quite happy to settle for me. But in a real crisis...often when their hearts are truly broken...it's to their mother that they turn. Is it really all that preposterous that God—the unceasingly compassionate God who created us in the beginning, who is determined to love us to the very end, and who has surrounded us with so great a cloud of witnesses...^x

...is it really all that preposterous to imagine that God, knowing us far better than we know ourselves, might make a similar provision for us when we face the

dark times....when we face those moments when there are hearts to mend and tears to dry...times when we need to know, beyond any shadow of doubt, that there is someone whose prayers on our behalf will never end, will never cease? And who, very much like her Son, desires nothing so much, but through lives restored and renewed—**our lives** restored and renewed—to give God the glory! Not to hold on to the glory for herself—**God forbid!**—but to bring it all to the Holy One! To give it all to God!

And glory be to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God in the Church, and in Christ Jesus: now and forever more. Amen!

ⁱ That having been said! While I find the claim problematic, I am hesitant to dismiss it too lightly as a result of my fondness of the story of Bernadette of Lourdes, a story that is remarkable in countless ways.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernadette_Soubirous

ⁱⁱ Luke 1: 26-38

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 1: 18-25

^{iv} Luke 1: 46-55

^v Luke 2: 1-7

^{vi} Mark 3: 31-35

^{vii} John 19: 26-27

^{viii} Luke 24: 1-12

^{ix} Acts 1: 14

^x Hebrews 12:1