

Homily for Sunday December 7th 2008 (Advent 2B) Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary

Last week I talked about the importance of making sure that our Catholic faith is not just an activity that we keep for Sunday mornings, but is a part of our very being, something that flows into everything that we say and do. I am hoping to use these homilies of Advent to try and pick up on some traditional Catholic prayers and devotions, things that are familiar to many of us but which have in some cases slipped out of sight and out of use. Today I would like to talk to you about devotions to Mary.

I suppose that we could start by asking why we need have any sort of devotion to Mary at all. Surely all that matters is that we worship God? Well, that of course is absolutely right. Human beings were created to worship God, and true and lasting happiness (the fulness of which we will call Heaven) is to be found in worshipping God. On its own the statement 'we should worship God' is true, but empty; we have to go further. We should indeed worship God - but how? That is where Mary becomes so important. If we want to know how to make a cake, we ask someone who is good at making cakes; if we want to know how to drive a car, we get someone to show us; if we want to know how to relate to God, how to fit him into our lives (or, more correctly, how to fit our lives into him), how God and I should fit together, then we look to someone who is good at that, and no-one is better at it than Mary.

The Bible is our starting point for Devotion to Our Lady. The angel at the Annunciation refers to her as 'full of grace'; she is to be the Mother of Christ, the 'God-bearer' and she is uniquely and perfectly prepared for this role. She is to have the privilege of looking day by day at the child in her arms; she is to know his face, his voice, his life, better than anyone else. Mary lives closer to Jesus in his earthly life than anyone else does. And this is not mere theory, some sort of abstract academic idea. The gospel of St. John shows that Mary has understood the mission of Jesus very deeply. It has been a painful and sometimes difficult task, and there have been uncomfortable moments, like the episode where Jesus was lost in the Temple, but by the time of the wedding at Cana she has come very close to the heart of her Son who is also the Saviour of the World. Before anyone even seems to have noticed the problem, she observes 'They have no wine'. Then she tells the servants 'Do whatever

he tells you'. This brings us close to the heart of devotion to Mary. Because she has been so close to Jesus all through his life, she remains close to him now. Still she is able to see the needs of ordinary everyday people, people like the wedding family, people like you and me; and with humility she brings these needs before Christ. What is more, she repeats to us again and again the same advice: do whatever he tells you.

So it is that devotion to Mary is not something that we put in place of worshipping God. We turn to Mary because with her help we are able to worship God better. God chose that his Son should be born of a woman; he chose that Christ should be nurtured and cared for, be dependent upon, a woman. There is something very important here. Christ, the Saviour of the world, through whom all things were made, comes to us in such a way that he is not from the very beginning independent, powerful, self-reliant. He is born into weakness and vulnerability, he is born into relationship; the image of Mary holding Christ with great tenderness and love is an image which places at the heart of our faith the powerful bond of love and affection that unites a mother and her child. There is something wonderfully human, wonderfully easy to relate to, totally universal and extending to all cultures about a mother cradling her child in her arms. Mary the Mother shows us what it means to love God. To try and be a follower of Christ but to ignore the special place of Mary is to miss out a great part of God's creation, God's plan. God planned that things should be this way, planned that Mary should lead us to Christ, planned that Mary should show us how to love him, and to be loved by him, planned that Mary should help us to see that face she knew so well and loved so much.

So Mary stretches out her hand to us and invites us to walk with her on the way of discipleship. She shows us the power of obedience; she shows us the power of love; she shows us the power of faith, because a poor, simple young woman can dare to say that God will cast down the mighty and raise up the lowly [Magnificat]. She wants to lead us to Jesus, because the most natural thing in the world is for a mother to want other people to know and love her child. It is in that spirit that we turn to Mary.

There are three things that I would like to mention very briefly about devotion to Mary. The first is the tradition, dating back at least to the Ninth century, that Saturday

is Mary's day. If there is no other feast we always celebrate a mass of Our Lady on Saturday morning. Mary carried Jesus, the Word; she was a woman of contemplation who, after the finding in the Temple, 'stored up all these things in her heart' (Luke 2.51). She was deeply thoughtful and attached to God's living word. So Saturday, which is the day when we prepare to celebrate together Christ's presence among us on Sunday, is devoted to Mary. The day before our Sunday mass we are invited to spend time with Mary, so she who spent 9 months waiting for the arrival of the word can help us learn how to wait well and productively for Jesus. If you want to spend some time, however little, with Mary, Saturday would be a good day.

The second thing I would like to mention is the Angelus, the traditional Christian prayer at dawn, midday and dusk, which recalls Christ's incarnation. This is not easy to fit into our busy lives - but people's lives have always been busy, and it is a habit which we could try to acquire. As a start, we could give a few moments to saying the Angelus when we stop for lunch, so that there is a brief recollection of the incarnation in the middle of our day.

Finally, I would like to mention the Rosary. People are often put off the rosary - it seems too long, or too repetitive, or not our kind of thing, or whatever. This is a pity, because it is a great gift that we can use very imaginatively. We don't have to pray five decades at once; although it is good to give enough time to lose ourselves a little, there is nothing wrong with just saying one decade - it is better to say that than nothing at all. We don't have to limit ourselves to the traditional mysteries. There is plenty in them to fill our minds, but we could just as well use the rosary prayers to meditate on the Epiphany, or on Jesus walking on the water, or so many other events. In addition, the rosary is a great prayer of intercession: I might offer a decade of the rosary for a friend, or for a family member, or for some cause or intention close to my heart. Like so many of the devotions I am looking at one of its great strengths is that it does not depend on having a priest to hand. The more we can get back into using some traditional prayers and devotions, the less we come to rely on the priest to provide all our religious input.

If you choose to ask Mary to help you to pray, I suggest you look for a picture of her to help act as a focus for prayer in your home. My favourite is The Virgin of Mercy - Mary sheltering people under her cloak, but there are so many. Here, to finish, is a poem that perfectly sums up the place of Mary, as well as helping us prepare for our Christmas celebration.

*Mary the Dawn, Christ the Perfect Day;
Mary the Gate, Christ the Heav'nly Way!*

*Mary the Root, Christ the Mystic Vine;
Mary the Grape, Christ the Sacred Wine!*

*Mary the Wheat-sheaf, Christ the Living Bread;
Mary the Rose-Tree, Christ the Rose Blood-red!*

*Mary the Font, Christ the Cleansing Flood;
Mary the Chalice, Christ the Saving Blood!*

*Mary the Temple, Christ the Temple's Lord;
Mary the Shrine, Christ the God adored!*

*Mary the Beacon, Christ the Haven's Rest;
Mary the Mirror, Christ the Vision Blest!*

*Mary the Mother, Christ the Mother's Son.
Both ever blest while endless ages run.*