



La Pietà (1499) by Michelangelo

The role of Mary, the mother of Jesus was central to his life as any mother is to the life of any child. This special relationship is evident in the Bible and in the tradition of the church and contains a potential for spiritual growth and development for all Christians because it is a story of love. If you go into any Roman Catholic or Orthodox church anywhere in the world, you will immediately notice the mother of Jesus. As in our own Old Church, she will be visible and prominent in the church's statuary and in a variety of postures and situations.

The Annunciation- Mary is told by an angel that she is to have a child and accepts the mysterious news in an act of self-commitment;

The Visitation –Mary greets her cousin Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's child leaps in her womb;

The Journey to Bethlehem- in an advanced state of pregnancy and with anxiety about the delivery of her son;

In a stable- with the birth of Jesus having just occurred, and often surrounded by shepherds, Wise Men and angels, with a smattering of animals thrown in;

In the Temple in Jerusalem -presenting the child to God with Simeon and Anna approaching them and saying strange things;

The flight into Egypt- on the road again, running from Herod's soldiers, a scene of refugee status;

Life in Nazareth- domesticity and child-care, sometimes shared with her husband Joseph, often with a carpenter's shop in the picture somewhere;

The incident in Jerusalem – when Jesus gets left behind and his parents have to return to find him;

At the wedding feast in Cana- where her authority over Jesus as a mother seems to be still evident. He doesn't agree to her request, but she tells the servants to do what he says, and he says it and they do it!

Family claims – after his public ministry has started, Mary tries to see him whilst he is addressing people and he sends her away;

At the foot of the Cross- Mary is seen watching in grief as her son dies. From his cross, Jesus commends his mother to the beloved disciple John, to be his care after death;

Taking his body down- Mary holds her son in death as in birth;

At the tomb- the final duties of a mother for a dead child

At the Ascension- Mary is with the apostles;

Then at Ephesus- Mary retires and spends the rest of her life. Many people who visit Turkey make a trip to Ephesus and see this holy site. The story then gets a bit complicated. Many Christian people could not bear the thought of Mary just dying and so although there is nothing more in the Bible about Mary, stories started to appear in the 4th century that she had not simply died, but had been taken, body and soul, into the glory of heaven, in recognition of her unique role in the story of salvation.

At Christmas, images of Mary and her child will be seen in our Christmas cards (albeit less frequently these days) and in every art gallery in the world, you will see images of Mary based on one or more of the events in her life, painted by all the great masters and representing part of the core of Western artistic achievement as well as poems and songs of many styles and emotions

So, what can we take from this extraordinary story?

- Acceptance of life's realities. There are some things which you can't change, sometimes when you really want to change.
- A long view of the things which puzzle us or perplex us. There is no wisdom in trying to understand everything immediately. Sometimes it takes time and we need to wait and live with doubt and uncertainty.
- Awareness of the goodness of God, even in times of doubt and fear. A very difficult position to take up and sustain.
- Willingness to accept our vocation to a Christian way of life, even when it doesn't seem to make sense.
- Full attention to the work of love in child-care and education, at home, through support for schools and Christian education.
- Courage in the face of tragedy and grief, because it happened to her, it happens to others and it may one day happen to you.
- Love of Jesus in every practical sense, as his Mother loved him as a child and as an adult son, we need to see our relationship with Jesus going through stages representing our own journey of life.

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) wrote these words which somehow capture the right mood of the Festival of the Blessed Virgin Mary and as we think about her special role:

**Angels and archangels
may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim
thronged the air -
but only his mother
in her maiden bliss
worshipped the beloved
with a kiss.**

We will sing these words later today and pray with Christina Rossetti that we can offer him our hearts as we live our lives in the light of his life and teaching, his suffering and death and his rising to new life.