



Missional Identity: Mary as a Model for Youth Formation/Discipleship

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Three women, separated by centuries, culture and age. The first, an old woman who helped her two brothers found a nation and followed them in celebrating the destruction of their enemies (Exod. 15:1-21). The second, younger and desperate for a child of her own; the child, offered to God, became a kingmaker and king-breaker, and saw the nation forge its identity under a legendary King (1 Sam. 2:1-10). The third woman, younger still – perhaps in her mid-teens – centuries later, in a quite distinct cultural context (Lk. 1:46-55). The most radical of them all, for God’s promise now extended beyond a single nation to the entire world.

Each woman is associated with a song, and each song reveals a development in the depth of understanding of God and God’s purposes in and for the world. There is a progressive nature to this theological development, showing both continuity with the past, but also a radical discontinuity.

The Youngest of These

Yet it is the youngest of these women who arguably demonstrates the most mature faith, who has the clearest vision of God’s character and purposes. It is Mary who can see with the eyes of faith a future in which justice, mercy and humility are realised.

Faith and Identity

For Mary, the role of faith has become explicit. It was the core aspect of her people’s identity; you could not be Jewish without having a faith-identity, which in turn shaped the cultural and political identity. It united all Jews at the time and thus it was part of her core narrative. In a sense, despite faith being publicly practised, it was hidden in the same way that my male, white, educated, European, heterosexual privilege is public and yet, for so many white, Western, educated, heterosexual males, it remains hidden from themselves. We can all be so blind to our own cultural influences and our own prejudices and privileges. Yet for this young woman, this was not the case: for her there was a definite and personally aware dimension to her faith. She displayed her engagement with her faith at both spiritual and practical levels, with the Scriptures of Israel as the narrative through which she understood her life. Thus, her engagement with the Bible was life-enhancing. Upon hearing that she would bear a child, the young woman

declared, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord” (Lk. 1:38). To her relative Elizabeth she narrated her life and the works of God through texts from her sacred Scriptures. The Bible both guided her thoughts and her actions such that God through her obedience made the world a better place. Mary is an embodiment of faithfulness and Bible engagement.

Mary and Bible Engagement

Mary quoted from the Old Testament in the Magnificat. It has resonance with Hannah’s song (1 Sam. 2:1-10), but there is a different focus. Ackroyd notes, “the themes of rejoicing, of the power of God, of the reversal of fortunes, of the prospect for God’s people, draw the two together.”^[1] Yet Mary’s language lacks the strident military language of Hannah’s psalm: the Lord is still all powerful and mighty, yet Mary’s language is more gentle and graceful. There is a topsy-turvy upside-downness to Mary’s understanding of power compared with the way Hannah talks. An example of this is the way the poor are raised up: for Hannah they are raised and lifted up to “sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour” (1 Sam. 2:8); their position is reversed such that they become as one with princes and placed in honourable positions. Not so with Mary: in the Magnificat there is a dual reversal of position. The lowly are lifted up, but not to be like princes in places of honour, for those in such lofty positions are brought down (Lk. 1:58). Again, the adult Hannah makes use of military metaphors (enemies, victory, bows, gird up, the Lord kills and guards). She rejoices in her victory over Peninnah, her ‘rival’ (1 Sam. 1:6). The child Mary makes only one ambiguous (possibly military?) reference: God “has shown strength with his arm” (Lk. 1:51). Mary’s psalm is more personal, intimate and graceful. It is about the God she knows, not only the God who has done good things for her. The child Mary has a personal relationship with God because of who he is; the adult Hannah’s relationship focuses upon what God has done for her.

Loving Submission

Thus, Mary is a submissive young woman. Submissive: this is such a troublesome word! We usually understand the word in the context of power relationships, of one with limited or no power submitting to one with greater or absolute power, with little or no choice; the word is analogous with oppression. In many cases that is precisely what happens: the vanquished submits to the victor; the victim to the bully; the poor to the rich; the slave to the master; youth to the elders; the powerless to the powerful. But that is not the dynamic at work as far as the young woman Mary is



concerned. She stands in stark contrast to, for example, Jonah, a most troublesome adult.

The dynamic at work with Mary is not one of submission from fear or force, but the submissiveness of love; God is not oppressing but empowering. Mary is especially favoured, and the Lord is with her (1:28); she has found favour with God (v. 30); she has been chosen for a specific task: to become the bearer and mother of God. Zechariah wanted proof of the angel's words in v. 18. It is a masculine approach: "prove it!" Mary, however, points to the obvious problem (her virginity – which implies lack of husband, lack of social and economic power, and youthfulness). The angel explains how the conception will be achieved and Mary accepts his word. God's capability overcomes human incapacity.

Reimagining Power

There is this upside-downness of Mary's story – God incarnating himself through the obedience of a girl, of one of the 'least of these.' It is not simply that the weak become powerful in the kingdom of God, as if tables have been turned, but that power itself is reimagined, redefined in the weakness itself. Mary is the archetype precisely because she grasps this. Perhaps she does not understand it all, but she certainly gets it more than the adults and the powerful ones around her. She is the one who treasures these things in her heart (Lk. 2:51) – these glimpses of the kingdom that have come in her son are what enable her to maintain her stance of obedience even as a grown woman and as she watches him die on that cross. Could the teenage Mary have imagined the agony of watching her own child die? I do not know, but she did not desert him at the cross, even as she had not deserted him when he was born. She shows us what it means to want a child, to give a child life, even in the harshest circumstances:

"In contrast to Zechariah, Mary holds no official position among the people, she is not described as 'righteous' in terms of observing Torah, and her experience does not take place in a cultic setting. She is among the most powerless people in her society: she is young in a world that values age; female in a world ruled by men; poor in a stratified economy. Furthermore, she has neither husband nor child to validate her existence. That she should have found 'favour with God' and be 'highly gifted' shows Luke's understanding of God's activity as surprising and often paradoxical, almost always reversing human expectations." [2]

Thus, Mary's inner life shapes her response to God's call upon her life; she responds in faith, in willing submission. There is both continuity with the story of her people, and

yet discontinuity as her Son reinterprets the reign of God, inaugurating the 'now and not yet' Kingdom of God. Mary lived in the time between times, the end of one era and the beginning of the new.

Mary as an Archetype for Discipleship

Mary offers a glimpse of one young person, shaped by her society and family, and – above all – by the God she loved. She is highly favoured, and Luke sees her as an example from whom we can learn. Mary is a model of faith, courage, and humble submission: an archetype of discipleship. She is the unexpected and surprising person chosen by God, the young person whose voice is seldom heard, the woman-child on the margins of society, the one whose prophetic imagination and commitment to justice is desperately needed by today's church.

The example of Mary reminds us that we overlook young people to the Church's detriment, for they may have a vision for the future that is informed by their life experiences and by God, but which lacks the jadedness or rigidity that can come with age.

End Notes

- [1] Ackroyd, P. (1971) *The First Book of Samuel, The Cambridge Bible Commentary*. Cambridge: CUP, p.30.
- [2] Johnson, L. T. (1991) *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, p.39.

Further Reading

- Baxter-Brown, J. (2017) 'Children Can be Called by God and Hear His Voice' in *Mission To, For and With Children-at-Risk: A Kairos Moment for the Whole Church*, Baxter-Brown, J. (Ed.) Lausanne Issue Network on Children-at-Risk, Limited edition eBook, pp. 401-414.
- Greener, S. (2013) 'Raising Samuel: Releasing Children to Discover God's Purpose', in *Children and Youth as Partners in Mission*, Brewster, D. & Baxter-Brown, J. (Eds.), Compassion International, pp. 161-181.

