

A DIFFERENT LOOK AT MARY

Mary, the Mother of Jesus: a serenely focused, blue veiled woman of holy mystery. My initial impression of her was that of an immaculately white dressed figure kneeling before a baby in a nativity scene. It was, until I lived in the region she lived so long ago.

Like Christians, Muslim friends of mine have similar impressions of her purity, honesty, beauty and integrity. Not to mention her submission and obedience, both words which have become the 'new dirty words' of my generation. But living in the Middle East gave me a very different picture of the stark reality of her situation, and stirred questions in my woman's heart of what her submission really cost her, and what impact results from practicing those 'dirty words'.

What if she, a young engaged teenager, was discovered pregnant out of wedlock in Gaza instead of Galilee? Would she and the child she carried even survived the penalty of her sin as determined by an honor based society? The whole account of her life known to us is that of young girl who was rewarded with impossible miracles as a result of her 'extreme' submission, whose faith in God's goodness caused her to take extravagant leaps of faith that would put her life at risk.

Tradition tells us she was from a poor, lowly family, born in the old age of her parents: just another illiterate, outwardly indiscriminant girl from Gallilee. Was she yet another daughter to feed and provide a dowry for, suffering from 'third daughter syndrome': continually reminded how much better life would have been if she had been born a boy?? Perhaps this is the reason they named her "Mariam", meaning 'bitterness' to them, rather than 'Farah', a joy. Or was it to reflect the despair of a people living under oppressive occupiers of their land? Yet both the angel Gabriel and her relative Elizabeth, also miraculously pregnant, call her blessed, not bitter. Now she was not just another village girl, but perhaps the hardship of her place in life had prepared her heart and character to be the one chosen to fulfill prophecies of ages past. Blessed indeed, her joyous cry to God, known as the Magnificat, records her amazement at God's great mercy to have chosen her, from a humble and even hungry state to mother the Messiah.

I imagine the response of her mother when Mary told her she had been visited by an angel and was pregnant. I can see her mother standing open-mouthed and speechless, finally blurting out: "You had better come up with a better story than that!" After beating Mary, surely she would run screaming to the house of her sister to share the latest family tragedy: "My worthless daughter is both crazy AND pregnant!" The account of the story in the Gospel of Luke states Mary then left "in haste" to the hill country of Judea to her relative Elizabeth. Today, to drive from Nazareth to Hebron with all the checkpoints would be an arduous enough journey by car that few parents would allow their teenage daughters to attempt alone. Mary had no car, probably no donkey, and not even an escort recorded. What would cause a girl to flee her family and risk a 75km journey? Death. The penalty for adultery was stoning; perhaps she was running for her life.

Elizabeth was the only person who would be able to understand, being the only other woman in the region who had an angel tell of a future pregnancy and name her son also: John, Yahya, the forerunner of the Messiah. Elizabeth's pregnancy was miraculous in a different way, for

she was well past the age for child-bearing. A perfect mother-figure until her own mother calmed down, Elizabeth was also the perfect companion in preparing Mary for the lifelong reproach of a pre-wedding pregnancy. She knew the lifelong shame of barrenness and probably the pressure on her husband to divorce her to marry a woman who could give him sons. An additional blessing was that Elizabeth, as the wife of a religious leader, could teach Mary the prophecies surrounding her son's birth that would encourage her when the going got tough.

Her fiancé Joseph's own angelic visitation possibly also saved her life. News of her pregnancy had reached him, and being a just man, he wanted to save her the humiliation by quietly divorcing her. But that busy angel appeared to him when he was asleep, telling him not to fear to taking Mary as his wife. Rather than argue for his own personal honour, he got out of bed, found his girl and married her to save hers. With her absence, his haste made it less easy for gossiping neighbors to 'count the months' and he would take the blame for his lack of self-control.

Her life and the child's were spared, but talk those villagers did. Thirty years later, when Jesus was arguing with the religious leaders, they spoke of his 'illegitimacy'. Imagine the talk when the news was fresh if it lingered for thirty years. Mary would hear the whispers when shopping in the souk, as would Joseph as he went about his trade as a carpenter. But they had between them miraculous words to encourage them to carry on.

Providentially, to fulfill prophecy and also cover the exact time of the birth, Ceasar Augustus called all men to return to place of their birth. With the importance of extended family for survival then even greater than as it is today, Joseph's relatives would be plentiful to house them and provide the midwifery his young wife needed.

But it seemed the news of Mary's questionable pregnancy had already reached Bethlehem. Although from a large family, not one of Joseph's relatives were waiting with the hearty greeting: "Ahlan, ahlan". The town was full, no room for them except in an animals' pen, perhaps a cave. Imagine their dismay as they realized as she would have to deliver the promised one alone yet, in full view of the public; outside in a disgustingly dirty place. Each contraction-induced sharp intake of breath drew in the pungent sting of the dung to Mary's lungs. Joseph, assuredly untaught in midwifery, could only sit helplessly as his young wife labored.

Was the joy of baby Jesus' arrival enough to help them forget their surroundings? If not, they soon had another one of God's on-time interventions: shepherds came to welcome with news of yet another angelic announcement, but this time it was given by an innumerable assembly that filled the night sky. The wonder of it most certainly overrode their shame, and Mary pondered these things in her heart..

The humiliation suffered by Joseph and Mary as they obediently submitted to God's unconventional plan evidently produced something beautiful in their son. In his later ministry, he was drawn to grant dignity to women in shame: the widow, the refugee, the prostitute, the unclean, and the adulteress. Could his compassion have been a product of watching his mother attempt to live in dignity when her reputation was marred by 'talk'?

One of my Muslim friends insightfully mentioned Mary's love symbolizing sacrifice. Without a doubt, Mary's greatest act of loving sacrifice and submission came at the end of

her son's life. Most mothers would be willing to give their lives for their children, but she was called to let her son die for her. The film "The Passion" illustrated this beautifully, as the looks the mother and son exchanged as he walked the Via Delarosa conveyed their mutual submission to God's painful plan.

Mary is no longer to me a sterile, porcelain figure in a Nativity scene. This Christmas, I will be meditating on what submission and obedience at this level would look like in my life; aspiring to emulate Mary as model to even this modern woman today.