

What can be said about St Mary the Virgin that hasn't been said before? Well nobody I suppose has ever said what an ugly little church, don't you think you need a few more paintings of angels on the walls? Actually Canon Bridges probably did, but we're not going to spend 10 minutes or so this morning talking about the parish of St Mary, Beddington, we're going to talk about the lady herself. What then can be said about 'Our Lady', the Blessed Virgin Mary that hasn't been said before?

Millions upon millions of words have been composed in praise of the mother of Jesus; hyperbole has been heaped high in her honour (and even excessive alliteration too); trillions of Hail Mary's have been said and whole forests of rosaries rattled; easily the highest number of church dedications are in her name and orders of nuns under her patronage; lakes of blue glass have been produced just so she can wear her favourite colour in stained glass windows and that's before we mention acres upon acres of paintings and forests of statues; intricate, dense theology has been woven like filligree around her and her role in salvation; people have been excommunicated and even hounded to death for calling her the wrong name.

It is an immense edifice unparalleled in human cultures. And this mind-boggling dedication to Mary is the ultimate in cultic economy, for it is a vast empire of piety hot-housed from the tiniest of seeds. Mary's appearances in the Bible- and whatever the denominational drag you sport, this has to be where your faith starts even if it isn't where it ends- her appearances in the Bible are few and far between. You could count them on your fingers and still have one or two to spare (and after all you can say most of what you need to say with one finger). So- counting the same story in different gospels as one story- there is the annunciation, the visitation, Christmas and Candlemas, the

finding in the temple, the wedding at Cana, the foot of the cross at the Crucifixion and praying with the apostles at Pentecost. It's not exactly a starring role, though given the endemic sexism of the 1st century (and 2nd, and 3rd etc.) that is reflected in the Bible that does make her the leading lady of sorts in the Jesus epic. To get us down to that all important one finger, however, there is one more cameo appearance in the Gospels, which is where I want us to go today. It's one that is usually left out of the list. You almost certainly didn't notice its absence. Unlike the rest it's never made it as a Mystery of the Rosary. It doesn't feature as a feast day of the church- even a commemoration- or even find its way, however tenuous the link, into the marriage service Preface. There isn't a votive mass option in its honour. This must be because it sits rather uncomfortably with the thrust and tone of everything else we want to think about Jesus and his mother, and by extension most of the last two thousand years of lionising filial relations and family values.

Here's the rogue reading. It appears in slightly different forms in the first three Gospels, but Mark's is the first account.

Then Jesus' mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And Jesus replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Just to make sure we have things properly in context (always important), Jesus family are not outside come to wish him happy birthday or see what sort of pizza he wants on Saturday or to tell him cousin John has arrived and they're all out of locusts. Could he do the water to wine trick but this time with insects. The reason they're outside is they've just heard that out of nowhere, Jesus has started healing people, declared the coming of the Kingdom of God and appointed twelve apostles.

'When his family heard this,' Mark's gospel says 'they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind.'"

His mum had come round to section him. Jesus's response is:

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!

Looks for all the world like a bit of dysfunctional family tit for tat. 'It's not me that's mad, it's you.'

Perhaps it's no wonder that this scene has not really figured highly in two thousand years of Christian devotion, it's no wonder there are no shrines to Our Lady of the Family Tiff. There's been quite a bit of unconvincing wriggling about some of the incidental features of this story, like trying to square the presence of Jesus's brothers and sisters with Christian assertion that Mary was evervirgin, but by and large Christian tradition has chosen to say 'nothing to see here' and pass over this passage in tellingly unseemly haste.

Which is a shame, because in the middle of the chaotic crowding, accusations of madness and disowning of the family there is here one of the most attractive parts of the whole gospel. Of which more in a moment.

First, however, no two ways about it, there is a negative side to this passage and we shouldn't just quickly airbrush away Jesus' rejection of 'family first' mentality. If what Jesus says retains its power to shock our priorities in the 21st century, by several magnitudes more was it utterly scandalously outrageous in the 1st century. Two thousand years ago your family were not just your nearest and dearest, they were your welfare state, your education, your status, your work colleagues, your patrons, your identity and, your responsibility. For starters. It went without thinking, without saying and without your choosing. Yet with two sentences Jesus casts that supporting pillar of Palestinian society aside. He becomes even more strident as his ministry progresses, until finally he declares:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

This is the side of Christianity the family values brigade always seem to conveniently forget.

OK, that's the down side. Back to the attractive part of the gospel message this passage portrays, the positive side I promised which far outweighs the negative. Even at its happiest (and not all are by a long chalk), the family can be a very inward looking, insular, and sometimes oppressive institution. It is also highly exclusive: you have to be born in it, be adopted into it or marry

into it. But what do we see here? Jesus has taken the most exclusive and closed of institutions, opened it up and made it the most inclusive. No longer are you a prisoner of your birth. Now anyone can be a member of the Holy family. Rather than all those saccharine sentimental pictures of Joseph, Mary and Jesus the happy holy nuclear family, what we have now is a group portrait of all ages and races and sizes and backgrounds and abilities, disabilities, experiences and desires. Like the whole-school photograph but a lot bigger. And with even more gurning involved. Look really close and your own face should be in there. "My mother and brothers and sisters; my Holy family" Jesus says "is everybody whom I love, and everybody who loves me."

So, all taken into account, both the negative and the positive sides of this tale, why then, is Mary accorded the astonishing place she has in Christian esteem? Why is she given a central place in the economy of our salvation, why does she have such an honoured place in our faith? Well what the 'who are my family?' teaching tells us is that this can't be because of the bits of Mary's double helix that Jesus inherited. Something more than DNA is going on here, something rather more than base biology.

What is going on is action and symbol. Action. Look at what Mary does. She says 'yes' to God's wishes. She is there at the base of the Cross when the rest have run away. She is there praying with the disciples on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes. There is all told a life of motherhood mixed with the actions of holiness.

And then there is symbol. Come with me to the place of Jesus' crucifixion.

Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother."

At the very moment of the Crucifixion Jesus' biological family and the family of his followers become one. That is the conclusion of the process 'Who are my mother and my brothers and my sisters?' that started all those months ago.

So when we accord great respect to Mary, when we call her the Mother of the Church we are quite simply saying, we are part of Jesus's family.

Here comes a Sister Sledge moment. We are family.

That sounds pretty good to me.