

THE LORD

Anyone who would understand the nature of a tree, should examine the earth that encloses its roots, the soil from which its sap climbs into branch, blossom, and fruit. Similarly to understand the person of Jesus Christ, one would do well to look to the soil that brought him forth: Mary, his mother.

We are told that she was of royal descent. Every individual is, in himself, unique. His inherited or environmental traits are revelant only up to a certain point; they do not reach into the essence of his being, where he stands stripped and alone before himself and God. Here Why and Wherefore cease to exist: neither "Jew nor Greek," "slave nor freeman" (Gal. 3: 27-28). Nevertheless, the ultimate greatness of every man, woman, and child, even the simplest, depends on the nobility of his nature, and this is due largely to his descent.

Mary's response to the message of the angel was queenly. In that moment she was confronted with something of unprecedented magnitude, something that exacted a trust in God reaching into a darkness far beyond human comprehension. And she gave her answer simply, utterly unconscious of the greatness of her act. A large measure of that greatness was certainly the heritage of her blood.

From that instant until her death, Mary's destiny was shaped by that of her child. This is soon evident in the grief that steps between herself and her betrothed; in the journey to Bethlehem; the birth in danger and poverty; the sudden break from the protection of her home and the flight to a strange country with all the rigors of exile—until at last she is permitted to return to Nazareth.

It is not until much later—when her twelve-year-old son remains behind in the temple, to be found after an agony of seeking—that the divine 'otherness' of that which stands at the center of her existence is revealed (Luke 2: 41-50). To the certainly understandable reproach: "Son, why hast thou done so to us? Behold in sorrow thy father and I have been seeking thee," the boy replies, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" In that hour Mary must have begun to comprehend Simeon's prophecy: "And thy own soul a sword shall pierce" (Luke 2: 35). For what but the sword of God can it mean when a child in such a moment answers his disturbed mother with

an amazed: "How is it that you sought me?" We are not surprised to read further down the page: "And they did not understand the word that he spoke to them." Then directly: "And his mother kept all these things carefully in her heart." Not understanding, she buries the words like precious seed within her. The incident is typical: the mother's vision is unequal to that of her son, but her heart, like chosen ground, is deep enough to sustain the highest tree.

Eighteen years of silence follow. Not a word in the sacred records, save that the boy "went down with them" and "advanced" in wisdom, years and grace "before God and men." Eighteen years of silence passing through this heart—yet to the attentive ear, the silence of the gospels speaks powerfully. Deep, still eventfulness enveloped in the silent love of this holiest of mothers.

Then Jesus leaves his home to shoulder his mission. Still Mary is near him; at the wedding feast at Cana, for instance, with its last gesture of material direction and care (John 2: 1-11). Later, disturbed by wild rumors circulating in Nazareth, she leaves everything and goes to him, stands fearfully outside the door (Mark 3: 21, and 31-35). And at the last she is with him, under the cross to the end (John 19: 25).

From the first hour to the last, Jesus' life is enfolded in the nearness of his mother. The strongest part of their relationship is her silence. Nevertheless, if we accept the words Jesus speaks to her simply as they arise from each situation, it seems almost invariably as if a cleft gaped between him and her. Take the incident in the temple of Jerusalem. He was, after all, only a child when he stayed behind without a word, at a time when the city was overflowing with pilgrims of all nationalities, and when not only accidents but every kind of violence was to be expected. Surely they had a right to ask why he had acted as he did. Yet his reply expresses only amazement. No wonder they failed to understand!

It is the same with the wedding Feast at Cana in Galilee. He is seated at table with the wedding party, apparently poor people, who haven't much to offer. They run out of wine, and everyone feels the growing embarrassment. Pleadingly, Mary turns to her son: "They have no wine."

But he replies only: "What wouldst thou have me do, woman? My hour has not yet come." In other words, I must wait for my hour; from minute to minute I must obey the voice of my Father—no other. Directly he does save the situation, but only because suddenly (the unexpected, often instantaneous manner in which God's commands are made known to the prophets may help us to grasp what happens here) his hour has

come (John 2: 1-11). Another time, Mary comes down from Galilee to see him: "Behold, thy mother and thy brethren are outside, seeking thee." He answered, "Who are my mother and my brethren? Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3: 32-35). And though certainly he went out to her and received her with love, the words remain, and we feel the shock of his reply and sense something of the unspeakable remoteness in which he lived.

Even his reply to the words, "Blessed is the womb that bore thee," sometimes interpreted as an expression of nearness could also mean distance: "Rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it."

Finally on Calvary, his mother under the cross, thirsting for a word, her heart crucified with him, he says with a glance at John: "Woman, behold, thy son." And to John: "Behold, thy mother" (John 19: 26-27). Expression, certainly, of a dying son's solicitude for his mother's future, yet her heart must have twinged. Once again she is directed away from him. Christ must face the fullness of his ultimate hour, huge, terrible, all-demanding, alone; must fulfill it from the reaches of extreme isolation, utterly alone with the load of sin that he had shouldered, before the justice of God.

Everything that affected Jesus affected his mother, yet no intimate understanding existed between them. His life was hers, yet constantly escaped her. Scripture puts it clearly: he is "The Holy One" promised by the angel, a title full of the mystery and remoteness of God. Mary gave that holy burden everything: heart, honor, flesh and blood, all the wonderful strength of her love. In the beginning she had contained it, but soon it outgrew her, mounting steadily higher and higher to the world of the divine beyond her reach.

Here he had lived, far removed from her. Certainly, Mary did not comprehend the ultimate. How could she, a mortal, fathom the mystery of the living God! But she was capable of something which on earth is more than understanding, something possible only through that same divine power which, when the hour has come, grants understanding: faith. She believed, and at a time when in the fullest sense of the word probably no one believed. "And blessed is she who has believed. . . ." If anything voices Mary's greatness, it is this cry of her cousin Elizabeth.

Mary believed blindly. Again and again she had to confirm that belief, and each time with more difficulty. Her faith was greater, more heroic than that of any other human being. Involuntarily we call to mind Abraham and the sudden, terrible sublimity of his faith; but more was

demand of Mary than Abraham. For years she had to combat an only too natural confusion. Who was this "Holy One" whom she, a mere girl, had borne? This "great" one she had suckled and known in all his helplessness? Later she had to struggle against the pain of seeing him steadily outgrow her love, even purposely flee it to that realm of ineffable remoteness which she could not enter. Not only did she have to accept this, but to rejoice in it as in the fulfillment of God's will. Not understanding, never was she to lose heart, never to fall behind. Inwardly she accompanied the incomprehensible figure of her son every step of his journey, however dark. Perseverance in faith even on Calvary—this was Mary's inimitable greatness.

And literally, every step the Lord took toward fulfillment of his godly destiny Mary followed—in bare faith. Comprehension came only with Pentecost. Then she understood all that she had so long reverently stored in her heart. It is this heroic faith which places her irrevocably at Christ's side in the work of redemption, not the miracles of Marianic legend. Legend may delight us with deep and gracious images, but we cannot build our lives on imagery, least of all when the very foundations of our belief begin to totter. What is demanded of us, as of her, is a constant wrestling *in fides* with the mystery of God and with the evil resistance of the world. Our obligation is not delightful poetry but granite faith—more than ever in this age of absolutes in which the mitigating spell is falling from all things and naked opposites clash everywhere. The purer we see and understand the figure of the Mother of God as she is recorded in the New Testament, the greater the gain for our Christian lives.

Mary's vital depths supported the Lord throughout his life and death. Again and again he left her behind to feel the blade of the "sword"—but each time, in a surge of faith, she caught up with him and enfolded him anew, until at last he severed the very bond of sonship, appointing another, the man beside her under the cross, to take his place! On the highest, thinnest pinnacle of creation Jesus stood alone, face to face with the justice of God. From the depths of her co-agony on Golgotha, Mary, with a final bound of faith, accepted this double separation—and once again stood beside him! Indeed, "Blessed is she who has believed!"

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