

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (10-12-1995 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

The Virgin Mary

Luke 1 v 26-55

Introduction

Sometimes the part played by the Virgin Mary in the Christmas story is overlooked in Protestant circles, for fear of appearing to elevate her. But if we can preach on Ruth and Hannah in the Old Testament, and Mary Magdalene, Dorcas and Lydia in the New Testament, we can also preach on Mary the mother of Jesus. There is much to be gained from exploring Mary's place in God's purpose, and many things we can learn from her character.

Begin in negative way – what do we *not* believe about Mary? Then the significance of her being, as a virgin, the mother of the Lord Jesus. Finally to consider her character as described in this chapter.

What do we not believe about Mary?

No better example of the importance of being clear about the matter of authority in belief and practice than Mary. If we take the Bible alone, we end up with the beliefs which will be set out in the second section. If we accept the Bible plus, there is no end to the extremes you get to and which, in the end, contradict the Bible. The Roman Catholic church, which rejects the sufficiency of the Bible, in practice exalts Mary above the Godhead. Thousands of shrines to Mary all over the world. Tens of millions of visitors annually. She is the very heart and life of Roman Catholicism. More prayers offered to her and more honour given to her than to Christ and God the Father combined. The present pope [1995], when globe trotting, has visited countless Marian shrines, and invoked her aid in nearly every discourse and prayer. The most recited Catholic prayer, the Rosary, concludes "Hail holy Queen. Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, our hope! Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us...O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary".

So what do we not believe about her? Firstly, we do not believe in her immaculate conception – that she was born without original sin. After all, she called on God as her Saviour, and the Bible confirms that "All have sinned". The only one without sin was our Lord Jesus Christ.

Nor do we believe that she remained perpetually a virgin. After birth of Jesus she entered normal marriage relationship with Joseph, as husband and wife. Mother of at least four more sons – James, Joses, Judas and Simon (Mark 6:3). At least two daughters as well. No reason to believe they were children of Joseph by former marriage. No evidence they were cousins of Jesus, since there is no use of the Greek word ἀνεψίτος for cousin to describe them. **Joseph had no union with her until she gave birth to a son** (Matthew 1:25). This statement confirms the virgin birth of Jesus, but that she ceased to be a virgin afterwards.

We do not believe her bodily assumption into heaven, i.e. Raised in her body to heaven where she reigns as queen. No evidence whatsoever.

Not do we believe prayer to her will secure favour from Christ for us. Prayer is to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. Bishop Fulton Sheen said he was “very certain that when I go before the judgement seat of Christ, He will say to me in His mercy ‘I heard my mother speak of you’.” His assurance does *not* come from Scripture.

Nor do we believe she can secure our Salvation, is a refuge for sinners, a redemptrix at the gate of heaven, our hope nor our guardian. Our confidence is in Christ alone. **There is no condemnation for them that are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).**

We do not believe she should be the object of worship. Unimpressed by the subtle but in practice meaningless distinctions in worship that “latria” are to God alone, while “dulia” are to the Saints, and “hyperdulia” are to the Virgin. Prayer to Mary is a waste of time, idolatrous and unavailing. In practice, it is raising Mary to the level of God, if she can answer all prayers offered throughout the world to her. No one would more disapprove of such unscriptural practice as Mary herself.

What do we believe about her, and her place in God’s saving purposes?

She was a virgin when she gave birth to the Lord Jesus Christ, i.e. we do believe in the virgin birth (but not in the immaculate conception). Without the agency of a human father, and by a special overshadowing activity of the Holy Spirit, the second person of the Trinity took human nature so that he became man. Hence He is both God and man.

The virgin birth was the means whereby the Eternal Son became completely man without ceasing to be God. Not half God and half man, but truly God and truly man. Divine and human natures uniting in one person. The Incarnation was achieved through the Virgin birth. Essential that the Saviour was both God and man – else no Salvation.

Often aware of attacks on virgin birth within professing church as well as outside. Reason is rejection of the miraculous. Easier to say Jesus was born from married couple. Some even say Jesus was illegitimate child.

We hold the virgin birth because it is Scriptural. We have no problem with the miraculous, in fact it is very fitting that such a life should have a unique beginning – virgin birth – and a unique ending – bodily resurrection. Last Adam, sinless, head of new humanity was born in way that made clear his separation from old humanity.

In His coming, man was set aside and God takes initiative, and His power ensures a supernatural miraculous birth and the perfect sinlessness of the one who was born. So in light of this we honour Mary like any other female in the Bible. No more and no less.

Especially chosen as suitable mother for God’s Son because qualities of kind and loving heart. No other woman received such honour to give birth to Saviour of the

world. Evidently she was a woman of character, virtue and faith, though far from sinless, because she called God her Saviour.

We do not worship or pray to her, but with her we worship and pray to Jesus, her son. Also we follow her example in three ways.

Three ways in which Mary is an example

(a) A very humble woman, completely submissive to the will of God. Very humble – she was nothing, God was everything, His will was all that mattered.

The Angel Gabriel visited her in Nazareth with the announcement that she had found favour with God, and was to give birth to His son, Jesus. He would be great, the Son of the Most High, born to sit upon the Throne of ancestor David, to reign over Israel forever. His kingdom would never end. This would happen though she was still a virgin. She would be overshadowed by the power of the Most High, a miracle to take place in womb. Result – the Son of God would come to earth.

What an announcement. The sight of an angel, news of a son who would be great and have an everlasting kingdom. What thoughts and fears surged through Mary's mind. The amazement of it all, and its wonder. Then practical realities. Not only mystery but embarrassment, wagging tongues, gossip, slander to be borne.

Mary's response is a model for us. **Behold the maid servant of the Lord – Let it be to me according to your word** (Luke 1:38). This was all very strange. She could not have really understood it. There was going to be trouble ahead. Where would it all end? And yet she was able to say "I am your servant" – belong to you, hand self over to you, here is my body, circumstances, reputation, uncertain future – it is all yours. Do with me as you want and plan. She simply yielded self and gave away body and soul to be instrument in God's purposes.

Does this not put finger on the problem of many Christian lives? People will give selves to the Lord – 50%, 90%, 99% - but they hold back the last bit, to keep final control. Want to remain in charge of the process, with the option to withdraw if possible. Yet if lives to achieve anything for God, progress in Christian life, effective in His service, really satisfied, God's best – requires being able to say "I am your servant – do with me as you want". As Oswald Chambers wrote, "The man God uses has one purpose in his life, has removed every hindrance, and placed himself at the disposal of God" Is that us? It ought to be, of course, but is it?

Problem – incomplete consecration, divided heart, one thing we must retain final control we cling to (a plan, affection, sin..). How many lives are spoilt by that one thing. Every key of life handed over except that one. "I will follow you – but...". Here is the source of ineffectiveness, weakness, lack of peace. How we rob ourselves.

A book on my shelves "Scots Worthies" by John Howie. Not a comfortable book to read. Mini biographies of Christian heroes of Scotland in 16th and 17th centuries. The author's aim to encourage readers to grasp "the heroic, sacrificial and glorious nature of life consecrated unreservedly to Christ".

(b) Grateful heart for all God's goodness and grace. This follows from last point – heart right with God is always grateful and full of praise. The words of the Magnificat: **My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour** (Luke 1:46-47).

God had been mindful of her in her lowly situation. Done great things for her. She was thrilled with God's dealings. Such an honour to be mother of Messiah, to give birth to the Son of God. Every Jewish girl dreamt of that honour. Girl of noble family in Jerusalem would have been overwhelmed at such an honour. But to Mary, a peasant girl in a place like Nazareth, of which Nathanael said, **Can any good thing come out of Nazareth** (John 1:46).

Not only her lowly social position but spiritual state – here she calls on God her Saviour. So far from being in her immaculate conception, she admits she is a sinner, deserving of judgement and condemnation. But here is God acting in sheer grace to her.

Do you ever look back over life and trace God's dealings with you? So gracious to us. Think of where you might have been born, the home you might have lived in, the influences you might have been under. You have been born in a land where the Gospel is fully preached. You have been brought to realize your need of a Saviour, and to discover God's provision in His Son. That godly example set you by a faithful servant of God, that book you read, the home where you were reared. Think of His restraining hand, a miraculous escape, an accident where you almost died, an illness you almost succumbed to. Behind all this is God - His grace, power, Son, Holy Spirit, providential care, eternal purposes for life, His daily support, guidance, provision.

Have you ever thought of the kind of person you might have been, lost eternity to go to if God had not intervened? Who are we that God should have thus dealt with us?

Need to recapture sense of wonder and gratitude and privilege. Then a praising grateful spirit to be cultivated. As we live among ungrateful, dissatisfied, discontented people, we ought to be outstanding because we have very different spirit. Created to glorify God. Redeemed for same purpose. Grandest thing to do. Nothing so prepares us for heaven. Heaven is a place of ceaseless praise. Day and night adoration to Him that sits on the throne and to the Lamb. Worthy to receive power, riches, wisdom, strength, honour, glory and blessing.

Learn to speak well of God – at home, church, in conversation with fellow men. The more He occupies our praise, the less we are patting ourselves on the back. Every day as we travel through world, if heart is in right place, never find it difficult to raise an Ebenezer. Sweeten spirits, banish depression, silence carping criticisms and dismiss our grumbling habits. **You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people – that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light** (1 Peter 2:9).

(c) Diligent reader of God's word. Mary's Bible was our Old Testament. Her song, the Magnificat, is full of its teaching. Seven references or clear allusions to Psalms, 1 Samuel, Job, Isaiah, Micah, Deuteronomy and Exodus. Whole song is modelled on prayer of Hannah after Samuel's birth. She uses words of Scripture to praise God. She

is thoroughly acquainted with God's dealings with His people – how He put down the mighty (e.g. Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar), and exalted the lowly (e.g. Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel). Knows Bible promises – the words He spoke to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed forever.

Do we know God's word? Are we familiar with its teaching? Resting on His promises? Can we say with Jeremiah **Your words were found and I ate them. And your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart** (Jeremiah 15:16). Paul said **Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly** (Colossians 3:16). Regular, daily, prayerful, obedient study of the Word. Learn what blessings to expect, what promises to claim, sins to avoid, encouragements to take. The Word builds us up, strengthens us, matures us. We shall find, as Mary did, God keeps His word and He can be perfectly trusted.

In days of iniquity and error, false religion and weakness in the church, one of our greatest strengths is the Bible regularly read, prayed over, believed, obeyed. Bible reading people are source of all strength and usefulness. Many rivals to Bible – newspapers, radio, TV, good books, various duties. But none are substitute for Bible. Bible is source of all strength and usefulness in Christian life.

Conclusion

Mary is not queen of heaven, nor is she co-redemptrix at the gate of paradise, a refuge for sinners. But she was a good, virtuous woman chosen by God to be mother of incarnate Son. Honoured and respected. Example to us of obedience to God's will, gratitude for His blessings, and diligence in the study of His word.