

Readings tonight seem to talk a lot about relationships, namely how we have been related to God in Christ since the dawn of creation itself. On this feast day of the Immaculate Conception we hear one of the relatively few stories about the woman we call Mary, the Mother of Jesus, a major player in the mediation of that One Divine relationship. She is called many things: (Miriam) of Nazareth, Our Lady of Many Cities or Virtues, Queen of Heaven, Blessed Virgin, the Immaculate Conception and Mother of God (in the Greek that word is Theotokas – meaning the bearer of God).

What do all these titles mean – what have we as a church been trying to say. I confess I was an adult before I learned the IC does not refer to Jesus and the Virgin Birth but is saying something about Mary. What I hear coming out in the story is that Mary was young, really, young. Biblical scholars who interpret this story in its many ancient languages say the best description for Mary is that of young girl and they put her age at this point in her life at around 14 years old.

As I reflected on a 14 year old girl – on the threshold of womanhood – dealing with this situation presently confronting her – what was Mary feeling. I know it is not easy being really young, no longer a child but not quite an adult, and it is not easy being female just then as well. The tradition that I grew up in doesn't offer a lot of relevant insights about what life was like for Mary in these years. In our house and in my Aunt's homes there were busts of Mary in a prayerful pose with her head tilted to the side or pictures of her where she looks like she just stepped out of Renaissance Europe. When my Aunt Vera wanted to bless us kids she would take her tiny bust of Mary and tap it on top of our heads....and I did feel blessed actually.

When I received this opportunity tonight I asked Mary for help – and didn't so much ask what I should say but what should I see.

So this week I ended up thinking of the young girl from Pakistan whose name is Malala who was shot by the Taliban when she was 15 years old because she demanded girls in her country receive an adequate education. She is now a Nobel laureate and an icon of the movement that promotes the education of girls worldwide. Remember the 234 school girls in Nigeria who were kidnapped by the terrorist group Boko Haram while sitting in their classrooms in school – their captors fearing how an education might empower these young people and so sought to break their spirits by abusing their bodies and stealing their freedom. I think of Michelle Obama coming out of Chicago's southside with no family resources to support her - advocating for global support for girls of all cultures to receive an education and be the agents of their own lives. I think in our society we forget what a revolutionary idea this still is.

When I think of Mary of the IC which the church celebrates today – I no longer think of a European Renaissance painting but rather of a young girl of dark complexion, in ancient Palestine, a Jewish peasant living under an oppressive Government regime, and most likely she was not very well-educated – but her heart was indeed pure because it was filled with the belief in God's boundless love – God's unyielding presence in her life and abiding trustworthiness. Mary knew her baby was from God.

And in her joy she gave us the song called The Magnificat –

“God has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart

and put down the mighty from their thrones,

God has exalted the lowly

and has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich He has sent away empty”

Is this not the blueprint for the message that Jesus would later proclaim.
His mother his first teacher.

Of all the titles bestowed on Mary I think less of Virgin or Queen or Lady.
but of the one we receive from our Greek brothers and sisters -
Theotokas, God-bearer. As we travel to the light of Christmas perhaps we
can think of ways we can all be God-bearers, and even more importantly -
how do we as a church, as a society, as a country, as citizens of the
world, show and teach and tell today's young girls on the threshold of
womanhood - that they too can be Bearers of God.
Hail Theotokas, full of Grace. - Hail.