

So, what about the Virgin Mary?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 22 December 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Advent 4C

A Contemporary Reading: from 'On Hope' by Walter Brueggemann;

Luke 1 39-45

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

So, what about the Virgin Mary? How do you relate to the mother of Jesus? What sacred significance do you see in her?

Mary has certainly ignited Christian feelings powerfully down the centuries, prompting both profound spiritual warmth and reaction. This continues today. Back in July, for example, a sculpture of Mary was attacked in the Roman Catholic cathedral of Linz in Austria. The figure, designed by Austrian artist Esther Strauss, depicted the Virgin Mary giving birth to Jesus. It was beheaded by protestors, who, with others, had complained that it was blasphemous. It was a dramatic instance both of continuing contemporary struggles about religious freedom, and also, a very striking illustration of how women, and female bodies, are at the heart of conflicts over what is powerful and sacred.

In the case of the Linz statue, it is important to note that it was part of the *DonnaStage* art installation project on women's roles, family images, and gender equality. As we hear Luke's account of the Annunciation, let us therefore reflect: firstly, on what we inherit from history about Mary; and secondly, on how we ourselves might fruitfully understand Mary's role in salvation; including on how we might positively understand the doctrine of the Virgin Birth today. Let me begin, however, with another true story involving attacks on an art work and differing interpretations of Mary, faith, female power and the sacred...

How do you react, I wonder, to Alma López' photo-based digital print "Our Lady"?¹ It is at the back of our liturgy sheet today. As one focus for theological reflection, Penny and I have used this in the Queer Theology university course we teach. For it reflects some of the contemporary dialogue between received tradition, religion, political challenges, and the issues of women, queer and Indigenous people.

Alma López herself is a Mexican-born Queer artist and a lecturer at the University of California. Her work juxtaposes historical and cultural figures: in the case of Our Lady weaving together powerful Catholic symbolism with Indigenous art and women's issues. As with Mary giving birth in Linz cathedral, it has met with strong reactions. This is not surprising however, as it raises questions about patriarchal forms of power and representation and what is life-giving as well as confining in Mariology (that is, reflection on the person and significance of Mary).

Mary has a history

For, firstly, if we are to receive life through the stories and symbol of Mary, we have to recognise that we do not come easily to Mary afresh. Rather, historically and theologically, Mary has always been framed through a number of strong lenses. Indeed, Mary taps into pre-Christian and universal elements, as archetype, symbol, and sacred embodiment. In Christian Tradition, Mary has thus been given many titles: including Virgin, Madonna, Our Lady, and, most importantly, the Mother of God and Theotokos, God-Bearer.

She has many evocative epithets, which we can see in some names of Sydney churches and schools: epithets such as Star of the Sea, Queen of Heaven, Our Lady of Sorrows, Cause of Our Joy, Mother of Mercy. She has several names specifically associated with places: Our Lady of Loreto, of Fatima, and, in Australia, of Yankalilla, whose shrine is found, following an appearance of the Virgin's image in 1994, in an Anglican church in South Australia.

Alma Lopez' *Our Lady* is thus part of these traditions, particularly in association with the greatly venerated figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, whose prominence began in 1531 at the time of Spanish colonisation. Her basilica is the most visited Catholic shrine in the world, and the Virgin of Guadalupe, strongly associated with social justice, has also been taken up by political movements such as Mexico's independence movement in the 19th century, the United Farm Worker Movement in the USA in the 20th century, and in contemporary political causes like immigration.

Alma Lopez' *Our Lady* further radicalises these traditions. It depicts a performance artist, confidently staring back at the viewer, wearing a bikini of roses. Below there is also a topless nude butterfly angel. The roses allude to the Virgin of Guadalupe's origin myth, but her posture and eye contact defies the traditional version. Indeed, her cloak is covered in images of Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess. For this deliberately references the suppression of indigenous female power by Catholicism, with Our Lady representing how contemporary Chicanas are re-appropriating both.

Such reappropriation inevitably meets with response. Following its place in an exhibition *Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology* in Santa Fe in 2001, Catholic authorities and sensationalist journalism reacted negatively, with groups like *America Needs Fatima* stalking the image ever since, inciting conservative Catholics to protest wherever it has been exhibited. Among profoundly misplaced attacks, Catholic leadership excoriated the butterfly angel, complaining vigorously about the model, and the artist, for shocking sexual display. Had they engaged, they might have shifted in their horror, as the woman who was photographed took part in order to reclaim her body, better to heal after being raped.

In contrast, as in a book entitled *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition*, others have been inspired to explore further the real challenges the image throws up: including the rights and responsibilities of artists; the nature of religious and spiritual expression; the representation of queer sexuality as sacred; and the nature and development of feminism, especially within Chicana and Hispanic communities. For, unless we seek to jump out of our histories, we, as contemporary humans, need to explore more deeply the liberating strands, and burdens, of our religious and spiritual inheritance.

For, secondly, how do we see liberating strength in the story and symbol of Mary? Our Gospel text this morning leads us into similar reflections, within our own contexts. For Luke, especially in the great song we call the *Magnificat*, invites us into fresh, we might even say subversive, ways of owning Mary. We of course often come with the legacy of limited traditions. Yet, if we change the blinkers of so much Catholic and Protestant religion, we see a strong woman who helps change the world and a figure of profound spiritual focus.

Some of Alma López' themes certainly resonate with Luke's Gospel story and with Australian contexts: themes such as the continuing impact of colonialism; wider environmental concerns; destructive and collusive uses of religion; the struggles and power of women; and the challenge of the queer. In Mary, and in Mary's song, we see a woman bearing new life and hope in the context of the Roman Empire, of patriarchal dominance of society and religion, and the struggles of the marginalised. We might spend a good deal of time reflecting fruitfully on this. However, for the moment, let me suggest three particular pathways for reclaiming Mary as a figure of new life and a focus for hope...

Firstly, in today's Gospel, and in the more liberating strands of Mariology, there is a vital ethic of flourishing. Mary is here about the generating of new life, instead of much Catholic, and certainly far too much Protestant, focus on death. We are reminded that the Incarnation, the making visible the presence and reality of God, is at the heart of a living, fruitful, Christian Faith. We are encouraged to celebrate that divinity is born, even in very unlikely circumstances, amid bodily struggles, pain, and blood. We too can become *Theotokoi*, God-bearers, sharing life that brings joy. We are offered the model and symbol of Mary as a crucial image of how we, also, are always at least potentially pregnant with God. Maybe, in the midst of struggles, that can seem far-fetched at times. Yet, there may also be something in the traditions that Mary was herself raped, perhaps by a Roman soldier. Whether that is true, or not, Luke through Mary is telling us that nothing can keep us from sharing God's life-giving grace, whatever our circumstances. Certainly, the butterfly figure in Alma López' *Our Lady* points us in that direction.

Secondly, today's Gospel, and the best of Mariology, affirms Mary as a symbol of earthing and greening. That is part of the meaning of the roses in Alma López' image. For the rose, sometimes known as the '*Queen of spiritual flowers*', has long been a powerfully evocative symbol of Mary, the *Mystic Rose*. Furthermore, as Alma López image highlights provocatively, Mariology has also long connected Christian Faith with broader spiritual traditions, not least the power of the sacred feminine and of earth-based religion. That was part of the achievement of Catholic, and Orthodox, Christianities as they spread.

Whilst clearly controlling its impact, through patriarchal leadership and limiting places for women, they married the Gospel to received traditions, not least those of the land and the '*paganos*', the rural people. In contrast, '*Reformed*' religion swept away so much of Marian devotion at the Reformation, over-emphasising the text, intellectualism, and morality based on patriarchal order. However the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have always kept Mary as a kind of limited safety-valve for the sacred feminine and earth-based spirituality. No wonder so many people across the world responded so powerfully, with heart and soul, beyond the rational. Great popular Marian traditions, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, emerged.

This is also powerfully evident in European Christianity. I think, for example, of Lincoln's great cathedral. Built high above the landscape, from which it can be seen for so many miles, it was originally partly a demonstration of the Norman invasion, of violence and colonisation. Yet, it is no coincidence that it was named after St Mary the Virgin, representing both a very real and ersatz symbol touching into the depths of the land. For close on a thousand years, including generations of my own father's family, the local people have lived and worked upon the land, with the sacred feminine presiding over it and giving value to all that the land has produced.

There is indeed a deep ambiguity here, but which Mary will we then choose?

This brings me thirdly, and finally, to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, which I love deeply: not as a literal historical statement but, on a number of levels, as a life-giving symbol. To begin with, I love it because it reminds me of that great feminist saying, that '*God and one woman make a majority*.' In the face of insurmountable odds, like those faced by Mary, there is still hope, and, for women, this does not rely on the intervention of men, any more than hope for the marginalised relies on the agency of others with privilege.

It is very good, as with Joseph, when such collaboration happens, but it is not central. I also love the Virgin Birth as a symbol of the queerness of God, who is not confined to assumed norms of society, including supposed biological '*realities*'. Most of all however, I love it because the doctrine of the Virgin Birth relates spiritually to where we find the deepest new life and hope.

Mystics of various traditions, including Meister Eckhart, speak of this, as something which belongs not to Mary alone but to us all. Thomas Merton thus spoke of what he called the *Virgin Point* within each of us: a place is not so much to do with physical character as such, but with potentiality. This is the place of potential new life, of creativity, and (re)birthing, which, in many forms, lies deep within us. It is akin, as Beatrice Bruteau has pointed out, to what some Buddhists term our *Original Face*, or the *Zen Mind*.

This '*virgin point*', as Merton put it, '*at the centre of our being, is a point of nothingness... untouched by sin and illusion... a point or spark which belongs entirely to God...*' from which God gives grace and new life, and which we may magnify with Mary.

May we therefore know and sing it. Amen.

ⁱ <http://almalopez.com/ourlady.html>