

Sermon Advent 4 20/12/20 Mary Ark of the Covenant

Malcolm Guite's sonnet: **ANNUNCIATION**

*We see so little, stayed on surfaces
We calculate the outsides of all things
Preoccupied with our own purposes
We miss the shimmer of the angel's wings
They coruscate around us in their joy
A swirl of wheels and eyes and wings unfurled
They guard the good we purpose to destroy
A hidden blaze of glory in God's world.
But on this day a young girl stopped to see
With open eyes and heart. She heard the voice;
The promise of His glory yet to be
As time stood still for her to make a choice;
Gabriel knelt and not a feather stirred
The Word Himself was waiting on her word.*

*You bore for me the one who came to bless
And bear for all to make the broken whole
You heard his call and in your open yes
You spoke aloud for every living soul*

*O gracious lady, child of your own child
Whose mother-love still calls the child in me
Call me again, for I am lost
And wild waves daunt me now on this dark sea*

*Shine as a star and call me to the shore
Open a door that all my sins would close
And hold me in your garden. Let me share
The prayer that folds the petals of the rose*

*O gracious lady, child of your own child
Whose mother-love still calls the child in me
Call me again, for I am lost
And wild waves daunt me now on this dark sea*

*Enfold me now in love's last mystery
And bring me to the one you bore for me*

Malcolm Guite – lyrics for Theotokos by Steve Bell.

Today I'm going to talk about containers – well one container in particular, the Ark of the Covenant. In the OT the Ark of the Covenant is the place where God's presence resides.

We are used these days to throwing many containers away – plastic, glass, metal, and actually that has got us into bother hasn't it. But it isn't always the case, and in the past certainly wasn't. And special things may have special containers. In the OT the most special container is the box called the Ark of the Covenant. You can read about it in the books of Exodus, Numbers, Samuel and Chronicles and elsewhere. It is made of acacia wood, which was thought to be especially hardy [Shittim in Hebrew – also the name of a town, cp Josh 3:1], and covered in gold, with two figures of cherubim in top. The tablets of the covenant with God, the ten commandments were out in it. It was seen as a footstool or throne for God's presence. God enthroned upon or among the Cherubim (e.g. Is 37:16) It is the holiest thing in the tabernacle or tent, and when Solomon built the first temple the Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies. It disappeared before the Jews were taken into exile in Babylonia, but there is no mention that it was taken by the Babylonians (1 Esdras 1:54).

When it comes to special containers the Church uses silver or gold and so on for the most precious of gifts we have to contain – the consecrated bread and wine, the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ. We have chalices and a ciborium. But today we think of the most amazing kind of container for God – for Mary contains the uncontainable God.

So unsurprising then that Mary is thought of as being like the Ark of the Covenant – but not just *like*, she *is* the Ark of the New Covenant.

In our Gospel reading today Luke chooses his words carefully, not just using the first thing he thinks of – so he chooses the word – 'overshadow' (ἐπισκιάσει Lk. 1:35), "the power of the Most High will overshadow you" he writes telling us what Gabriel says. This is the same word used to describe the glory, the presence of God overshadowing the Ark of the Covenant in the OT (ἐπεσκίαζεν Exod. 40:35). God's glory, God's presence and power will overshadow Mary just as it overshadowed the Ark in the OT. Luke chooses carefully. We may not see it straight away, but his hearers and readers would.

This title for Mary is of particular relevance during Advent, the time of year in which we remember Jesus' time in Our Lady's womb and, together with her,

joyfully await his birth. The passage of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45), provides more scriptural basis for our understanding of Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant, especially when compared with 2 Samuel 6, the chapter before the one our reading today came from, and in which David welcomes the Ark of the Covenant. Here are some comparisons:

- David and Mary, in the Old and New Testaments, respectively, both set out for the “hill country of Judah,” and both remain at their destination for three months. So it tells us in 2 Sam 6:11; Luke 1:39.
- David’s words upon encountering the Ark in 2 Sam 6:9 are, “How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?”, they bear strong resemblance to the words with which Elizabeth greets Mary upon her arrival, “why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”. If Mary is the Ark then it is the same question.
- David, who is dressed as a priest dances for joy after the arrival of the Ark (2 Sam 6:14); John the Baptist, who is of priestly lineage (his father was a priest), while still in Elizabeth’s womb, leaps for joy upon the arrival of Jesus in Mary’s womb.

This is more than an Advent reflection: It touches on the dynamic of our own relationship with the Lord. The Lord took on our nature in order that, we might become partakers in his own divine nature. This sharing in divine nature happens through baptism, and again every time we receive the Eucharist.

The Incarnation and the Eucharist are thus intrinsically linked. No one understands this better than Mary, Ark of the New Covenant and ‘Mother of the Eucharist’: Mary who bore this Mystery, in its completion, within her for nine months.

But this quick rundown isn’t all. I said before Luke chooses his words carefully, and in Luke 1:42 when Mary visits Elizabeth, John the Baptist’s pregnant mother, he says she exclaimed with a loud cry” (ἀνεφώνησεν from ἀναφωνέω Lk. 1:42 GLT), this word isn’t used anywhere else in the NT – but it is used 5 times in the OT (1 Chr 15:28; 16:4, 5, 42; 2 Chr 5:13) and every time it is about a loud noise [of music] welcoming the Ark and celebrating the Lord’s presence.

I think if you add all that up it points to Mary being the Ark of the New Covenant – because she contains, she bears Christ within her. And it tells us that this Christ is God, because God is enthroned between the cherubim on the Ark.

But then add in the things the Ark contains and how that also points to Mary being like the Ark, or a new ark. The original Ark of the Covenant contained three things according to Hebrews 9:4: the tablets of the law, some manna - bread of heaven; and the rod of Aaron, the first high priest. Mary, the new Ark, bore within her womb Jesus, who is: the Word of God, the Bread of Life (Manna as seen in John 6); and he is *the* High Priest as we are reminded in the letter to the Hebrews.

We may look at Mary and see that she is like that Ark of the Covenant from the OT – but the early Church looked at things the other way round. They saw the Ark of the Covenant prefiguring, foreshadowing, anticipating Mary the Ark of the New Covenant. The word for this is that the Ark is a "type" of Mary.

It is also worth noting that the holiness of the Ark is also clear from the fact that in the Book of Numbers (4:5-6) the Israelites are commanded to "cover the ark" by veiling it with "a cloth of blue," whenever they have to carry it.

Pitre, Brant James. Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary (p. 46). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

What colour is Mary always shown in? Blue of course.

What does it mean for us?

Ark of the Covenant was a title for Mary very early on in the church as evidenced by the writings of St Athanasius [296-373], and Gregory Thaumaturgus [Wonderworker, 213-270]. It is very interesting of course, and shows how careful the NT writers were – but it also does something else, which is seen as Mary's particular task now, as then; to point us to Jesus, the Son of God, the Presence of God with us. One of the styles of Icons of Mary is called Mary, *Hodegetria* ("The One Who Shows Us the Way"). She can help us then in our spiritual lives by pointing us to Jesus.

And she reminds us that we too become vessels of Christ in the Eucharist – here is an antiphon, a verse from the 13th century from Worcester Cathedral. It was written to be sung during the reception of communion:

*Blessed womb
Of the Virgin Mary,
Which, heavy with fruit
Seeded in eternity,
Diligently carried
For us, humanity,
In the cup of life
The drink of all sweetness.*

Just as Mary is Theotokos – the God Bearer, just as the Ark of the Covenant was – so the living God is present for us in the Eucharist. Amen.

Mary, Ark of the New Covenant, pray for us.