

# Learning From Mary in Her Own Words

## *Wisdom for the Spiritual Journey*

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We know of her because she appears in a few scenes from the Gospels: the Christmas stories, a wedding, the crucifixion, the post-Resurrection community in Jerusalem, and Pentecost. She is often in the background, quietly present but off centre stage. From the perspective of these ancient records she says little, almost nothing when compared to others who hold significant places in Christian history. Still, we are drawn to her. Over the centuries she has been known by many names and identified by a multitude of titles. And the few words accredited to her are replete with wisdom that has been and can yet be probed ever deeper. The example and experience of this woman, Mary of Nazareth, are beacons along the pathways of the spiritual journey, guiding and nurturing, encouraging and supporting. These present reflections will draw upon the practical wisdom of five statements from her journey, to learn from Mary in her own words, to recognize her as an experienced traveller, to welcome her as a graced companion on our own spiritual journey.

### **“How Can This Be?”**

*Woman who Wonders, Woman of the Mystery*

The Annunciation is the scene of Mary’s first statement. As St. Luke relates the story in his Gospel, “the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary” (1:26-27). During this encounter, Gabriel informs Mary that she has “found favor with God,” she will conceive and bear a son, and name him Jesus. Given her situation, Mary’s question is not at all surprising. She does not dismiss Gabriel’s news, but accepts it as an invitation to ask “How can this be?” (1:34).

We meet Mary in this scene as a woman who wonders, not in the sense of simple reflection on the situation, but of puzzling astonishment. It is the experience of hearing that the impossible will come to pass. Rather than running from that experience, Mary is intrigued and willing to hear more from the messenger. She could have discredited this encounter as nonsensical. Instead, she wonders, embodying that quality which enables children to accept what adults will declare impossible or a waste of time. Rather than passing judgment on what she hears, Mary is ready to listen. Wonder opens her to the infinite possibilities of God’s grace, enabling her to face the unknown, the unfamiliar, the unexpected.

Wonder characterizes Mary as a woman of the mystery. In the Annunciation, Mary stands at the very threshold of the mystery of the Incarnation, of God becoming like us in everything. By its very definition, a mystery is a truth which goes beyond human knowledge and understanding; it must be accepted on the speaker’s authority. A mystery is explored not with analysis, but with wonder. Mary’s ability to wonder does not question or doubt God’s power, but opens her to a God who cannot be classified and catalogued by human standards and categories, a God who can do the impossible. Nor is her ability to wonder naïveté; she watches for the ways and works of God which extend beyond the limits of human calculations, expectations, and preferences.

Mary wonders before the mystery which Gabriel has opened to her. She does not assume or judge or calculate or worry about consequences and implications. She listens and waits, unencumbered by assumptions, judgments, calculations and worries. Mary does not know what will follow her conversation with Gabriel; she stands before the mystery to see what will unfold.

The Gospel accounts of the Annunciation do not tell us what Mary was doing immediately before her encounter with Gabriel. She may have been busy with her daily responsibilities or praying or planning her approaching marriage to Joseph. Even if we did know what she was doing, that would not tell us as much about her as does her response. She is open to the mystery of God.

### **Wondering at the Mystery**

Wonder must accompany us from the outset of our spiritual journey, for inevitably we will encounter the mystery of God. That encounter may not be as dramatic as Mary's conversation with Gabriel for the mystery of God can touch us quietly, almost unnoticeably. The way we respond to the mystery is more significant than how it comes. We can analyze and judge, to control what we do not understand. Or we can wonder and thus embrace freedom from the need to control. Without that freedom we diminish our sensitivity to God's ways precisely because God does not always work within our guidelines and assumptions.

Wonder enables us to watch beyond what our eyes see and to listen beyond what our ears hear. If we see and hear only what is familiar and acceptable, we will miss the simple and surprising ways in which the mystery of God can be present and active. Wonder also enables us to face the unknown or the apparently impossible. Wonder is not quick to insist it knows all the ways and means by which God's self-revelation can take place. It is free to be in relationship with a God who is completely free, who loves lavishly and gives gifts extravagantly. Wonder enables us to be people of the mystery.

Jesus presents an interesting challenge: "I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Reign of God" (Mt. 18:3). Children are capable of wonder, of being surprised, of delighting in the unexpected. Could it be that part of responding to this challenge is the simple ability to wonder, before we ask our questions and do our analyses, before we formulate our answers and design our responses. In our prayer, in our relationships with God and others, do we function with a recipe? Do our assumptions and images of prayer, God and others determine the answers, even before all the questions are asked? And if the answers do not fit those assumptions and images, do we dismiss them? Wonder tends not to ask, "What if I'm wrong?" but, "What if there is more than I presently assume or know?", "What if there is another way?"

Mary had the ability to live with wonder and thus God was able to work wonders in her life. It will be no different for us if we are people of the mystery. We may find that we are willing to ask, "How can this be?" before we conclude "This simply isn't possible!"

### **"Let It Be Done To Me As You Have Said."**

*Woman who Believes, Woman of the Word*

Once again the scene is Luke's account of the Annunciation. After Mary asks about the message communicated to her, Gabriel provides further information, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (1:35). Gabriel continues to explain that Elizabeth, an older relative of Mary's, will also have a son and concludes, "Nothing will be impossible with God" (1:37). Mary's response is eloquently simple: "Let it be done to me as

you have said” (1:38). Her willingness to wonder enabled her to hear all that Gabriel had to say; that same willingness is the very foundation for her faith.

Mary is a woman who believes. Her faith rests firmly on the promise of God. If Mary had understood and knew exactly all that would unfold in her life, faith would not have been necessary. But, she believes without knowing, she accepts God’s promise. Mary could have said, “No, this is too much; I can’t deal with this. How would I explain this?” Gabriel neither pressures Mary to accept what is being communicated nor offers a convenient solution for whatever difficulties might emerge. God’s will is announced; Mary is free to respond.

By her faith, Mary is a woman of the Word. As St. Paul reminds us, “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). In accepting the news which Gabriel brings to her, Mary not only hears God’s word, she becomes the means through which the Word of God will share the human condition. More than a hearer and doer of the Word, Mary gives birth to the Word in fulfillment of God’s promise.

Mary’s faith invites whatever God asks of her. It is unlikely that the Annunciation was the first time she was open to what God had asked. Her faith is a matter of the heart, a desire in life; and her heart and desire are set on God. Her response, “Let it be done to me as you have said,” is an act of courage, a decision based on God’s promise. Mary of Nazareth is the means by which God reveals the mystery of the Incarnation. With all this, could it not be said that Mary is one to whom God can say, “Thank you?”

## **Believing in the Word**

In our spiritual journey, the challenge is to pray and to live “Let it be done to me as you have said.” That might be easier to do if God would tell us in advance the implications and consequences of our statement; we would like to have a preview of coming attractions before we make a commitment. While that preview would be convenient, it would do away with the need for faith and diminish our dependence on God. As we learn in the Letter to the Hebrews, “Faith is to be sure of things we hope for, to be convinced of things we do not see” (11:1). We hope for the reign of God promised by Jesus, yet we do not always see evidence of God’s presence and activity.

St. Paul tells us in his second letter to the Corinthians, “We walk by faith, not by sight” (5:7). We do not know where our relationship with God will lead us, sometimes all we see ahead is darkness. Faith is light, but it does not describe our destination. Faith calls us to trust that God will remain present and faithful in everything, marking our lives with confidence and courage. It provides confidence for moving forward in life, knowing that God is present and active. Faith does not need verifiable proofs, only a heart open to God. Faith also gives us the courage to live without fear. It does not need a definite map of the future, only a willingness to accept the challenges which confront us in our everyday tasks and responsibilities.

Before Jesus is born, Mary prays, “Let it be done to me as you have said;” and before Jesus dies, he prays, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Both Mary and Jesus present the model of responding to God’s will: acceptance in faith. To be people who believe, we must be people of the Word. To hear what God says to us, we must listen within our daily lives; it is there that God’s self-revelation and will are discovered. Thus, our daily lives are the school of holiness. Mary believed, and God fulfilled the promises made to her. It will be no different

for us if we believe God's Word however and whenever it comes. Without faith, we hear God's Word and say, "Impossible!", "Unreasonable!" With faith, we hear God's Word and can say, "Of course!"

### **"From Now On All People Will Call Me Blessed."**

*Woman who Adapts, Woman for the World*

After the Annunciation, St. Luke tells us, "Mary got ready and hurried off to a town in the hill country of Judea. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth" (1:39-40). In response to Elizabeth's greeting, Mary praises God and proclaims, "From now on all people will call me blessed because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me" (1:48-49). From the perspective of twenty centuries since Mary made this statement, it has been proven true many times over. Mary is blessed in the eyes of people, she is for all people.

Throughout the history of the church, various aspects of Mary's life and character have been celebrated, and various private and public devotions have developed within Christianity. Further, Mary is known and honoured under various titles throughout the world, depending upon the particular people and culture from which a title emerged. Even a brief sample is extensive: Our Lady of Lourdes, Fatima, Prompt Succor, Guadalupe, Mount Carmel, Sorrows, Perpetual Help, the Rosary, the Snow, La Salette, Czestochowa, Holy Cross, Good Counsel, the Miraculous Medal.

Mary is a woman who adapts, "*all* people will call me blessed." She has had appeal to people of different cultures and races and languages and even religions. Mary has adapted to a wide range of needs, becoming one of the people. It is not surprising that devotion to her has remained strong throughout Christian history; her many names and faces and titles reflect her accessibility. Christians through the ages and in every culture have experienced easy access to her, describing her as understanding and listening and comforting. No doubt Mary will take on yet other titles that reflect the people's need to relate to her because she belongs to the world.

### **Adapting for the World**

Mary can be called blessed around the world because she looks familiar to every culture and society and race and nationality. Yet, Mary's mission and message remain firmly focused on the Lord. The challenge for us is to do the same: to be open and to accept every culture and race, even within our own society and nation and neighbourhood. Jesus' command is exact: "Do for others just what you want them to do for you" (Lk. 6:31). Jesus never promises that we will always like what we have to do for others; sometimes it may be difficult, unpleasant, or inconvenient. Jesus addresses the way we desire to be treated when we need something done for us. But he also highlights the implications of our treatment of others: "Whatever you did to one of the least of these, you did to me... Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Mt. 25:40,45).

To the degree that we can adapt, we become people for the world, we bring Jesus to the world. Our adaptability will be most evident in our daily lives and work. It is relatively easy to be sensitive to the plight of other people and cultures as we see their struggle on television or read it in the newspapers. The true challenge of adaptability is to have that same sensitivity toward the people we encounter every day. Adapting and adjusting to family members,

friends, co-workers provide us with ample opportunities to confirm or compromise the integrity of our spiritual journey. The prejudices with which we can classify all members of a particular group or age or race, or the many “isms” with which we can categorize people and strip them of individuality and even dignity, diminish our capacity for sensitivity and adaptability.

Mary had the unique privilege to become the Mother of God, to give birth to Jesus, to be the means by which God became part of our world. Our lives must give birth to Jesus’ presence in our world; our actions must continue his mission. We must live the example of Jesus among others. Then we will be people who adapt, people for the world. Then we, too, can be called blessed.

### **“Don’t You Know I Have Been Looking For You?”**

*Woman who Pioneers, Woman of the Quest*

The gospels do not tell us very much about the span of years between Jesus’ birth and the beginning of his public ministry. Within those years there would be valuable information about the family life of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. At least we can assume they observed the rituals and festivals in which other practicing Jews participated. And we can assume they were involved in whatever activities and responsibilities were necessary for maintaining family life in Nazareth.

St. Luke gives us one glimpse into those years, a story from the time when Jesus was twelve years old. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus went every year to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover; this time, Luke tells us, “When the festival was over, they started back home, but the boy Jesus stayed in Jerusalem” (2:43). After Mary and Joseph discovered his absence on the next day, they returned to Jerusalem. On the third day, they find him in the Temple, conversing with the teachers. Mary asks him directly, “Don’t you know your father and I have been looking for you?” (2:48).

Mary is a woman who pioneers, she is the first to set out on a journey to find Jesus. As a true pioneer, she forges the way that others may follow; the meaning and direction of her life are shaped by her relationship with Jesus. Even if we did not have this story of a twelve-year old boy fascinated by the big city and the Temple and forgetting to stay with his family, we would still know Mary as one who remains focused on Jesus. We see her at the crib in Bethlehem and we see her at the cross in Jerusalem; these two scenes give us ample material to realize that Mary is grounded in Jesus.

Mary is generally silent when we meet her in the Gospels; the story of finding Jesus in the Temple is an exception. Still, her silence is not passive observation, but attentive involvement. Mary does not merely watch Jesus’ life, she participates in it. In the Temple scene we have a glimpse of the everyday humanity of a mother and son: a young boy’s curiosity about the city, and a parent’s anxiety about separation from her child.

From the crib in Bethlehem to the cross in Jerusalem, Mary is truly a woman of the quest to be one with God through Jesus. When Mary agreed to be part of God’s plan of salvation, she set out on a journey; she took up a quest to complete God’s will in whatever would be asked of her. No doubt, there were moments of joy and pain, confidence and uncertainty, clarity and confusion. These are part of the spiritual journey because they are part of the human journey

What distinguishes Mary's quest is fidelity: God's fidelity to her and her fidelity to God. It is this faithful exchange that empowers her to pioneer the work of our salvation. Fidelity is particularly important because her life is guided, not by a preview, but by a promise made to her at the Annunciation and a pledge of fidelity. The promise: "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Lk. 1:37); her pledge: "Let it be done to me" (Lk. 1:38). Mary's question to Jesus in the Temple expresses the frustration and concern of a mother after searching for her son. Her pioneering spirit remained faithful to this three-day quest for Jesus; she would remain faithful throughout life.

### **Pioneering the Quest**

The spiritual journey takes us on a quest. Like Mary on the road from Jerusalem after the festival, we can assume that we will always sense Jesus near us. When we experience an absence in our lives, a distance from Jesus, we take notice. We look around in familiar places, but the sense of absence may persist. Then we stand at a crossroads. Do we ignore the experience or do we take up a quest? Mary's example challenges us to enter the quest. To look for Jesus and even to find him, we will have to go beyond the boundaries of a familiar and secure environment, and actually search. Those boundaries may include current forms of prayer or devotions within our spiritual lives. We do not thereby abandon prayer or diminish the value of our spiritual practices, but discover other ways of expressing our relationship with God.

Mary could have spent days searching within the caravan, a familiar and secure setting. That search would have moved her farther from Jesus. By departing from the caravan, Mary moves into the unknown, not knowing where to look. Our experience may be the same when we leave the "caravan" of our familiar prayers and devotions, our usual way of doing things. We may not know where to look for Jesus; the important point is our motivation, what is in our hearts. And our hearts will guide us, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will also be" (Lk. 12:34).

"Don't you know I have been looking for you?" More than a question, this becomes our experience of the spiritual journey, reflecting our fidelity to the Lord. Fidelity makes us pioneers; every step involves trust. We become pioneers and people of the quest to the degree that we remain sensitive to God's presence and activity in our lives. That sensitivity urges us to remain faithful, to follow God's ways wherever they may lead. When we sense a diminishment of God's presence and activity, we must examine that experience with faith and determine what supports will assist us in continuing the journey.

There will be times of joy and new life, as well as of pain and the cross; both are inevitable since they reflect the example of Jesus. Fidelity does not make us insensitive to the joy or the pain, but it does assist us in avoiding their potential to distract and to detour. Fidelity is the only baggage we need for the quest. Fidelity is more than what we do; it is what we become. Echoing through our life is the simple question, "Don't you know I have been looking for you?"

### **"Do Whatever He Tells You."**

*Woman who Educates, Woman of the Way*

Jesus' first miracle, or sign, as recorded in St. John's Gospel takes place while he, his mother, and his disciples are attending a wedding in Cana. The story is a simple one. The wine ran out. Mary must have been aware of the situation because, as John relates, "the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine'" (2:3). Jesus says that this is none of his concern. John then tells us, "Jesus' mother said to the servers, 'Do whatever he tells you'" (2:5). The servers do just that, and the remainder of the story is well known.

It is interesting to note that Mary does not respond directly to Jesus' remark, "My hour has not yet come" (2:4). Jesus had indicated that the situation with the wine did not concern him, or Mary for that matter, and that his public work had not yet begun. Mary's response remains centred around the practical: wine is needed, she knows her son can do something about it, so she points the way, she directs others to Jesus.

Mary is a woman who educates. The verb *educate* means *to lead out* or *to guide along the way*. Educators in ancient Athens and Rome were those who led children by the hand and guided them to school, reviewing lessons along the way. Mary leads and guides us to Jesus because he can do what is necessary; she places us in direct relationship with Jesus. Mary neither tells the servers what to say nor does she speak for them, she shows the way. Our relationship with her, whatever its form, will inevitably point to Jesus. As educator, Mary clears a path, she leads and guides.

At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, and even today, Mary is a woman of the way to Jesus. This is her primary role for the faith community. The great liturgical feasts of Mary reflect some aspect of her relationship with Jesus:

Immaculate Conception, Birth of Mary, Presentation, Annunciation, Visitation, Our Lady of Sorrows, Assumption, Queenship of Mary, Mother of God. Even many Marian devotions focus our attention on the Lord. The Rosary is one example: twelve of the fifteen mysteries focus directly on some aspect of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension. Mary's challenge today is as it was at the wedding feast, "Do whatever he tells you." We must listen to Jesus' word, discern what it teaches us, then do it.

### **Educating about the Way**

Mary educates us about the life of Jesus, leading us to him, encouraging us to do whatever Jesus tells us. Hers is a straight-forward mission: to bring Jesus into the world, then bring the world to Jesus. This is the model for our own mission, our example must bring Jesus into the world and then lead others to him. Following Jesus involves more than what we do, it is what we choose to be and eventually become. St. Paul instructs us to "put on the new self, which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its Creator" (Col. 3:10). Becoming a new person is a requirement not a suggestion. Jesus' presence and activity are made evident through actions, not merely by words.

Mary's teaching stands firm: "Do whatever he tells you." We may assume that we could not teach this because we do not live it perfectly ourselves. If we take this assumption to its logical conclusion, then the Gospel never would have been preached in two thousand years because Jesus entrusted his message to sinful followers. Human sinfulness and weakness are no reasons for not preaching the Gospel. Even when we fail, we must strive to demonstrate Jesus' example. We must not let weakness or failure or even sin discourage us, lead us to despair, and tempt us to abandon the spiritual journey. The grace of God can transform even

weakness and failure and sin. We educate others about the way of following Jesus by our own efforts to follow him.

### **Continuing the Journey**

We set out on our spiritual journey with the ability to wonder. Even before faith, comes wonder. We hear of God's infinite love for us, of Jesus' life and example, all for our salvation; we wonder at the mystery of it all and ask, *How can this be?* This question is already the beginning of faith. We are drawn to believe, to trust the one who has captivated us with wonder. As we believe so we are drawn yet closer, to hear God's Word more clearly. And we dare to pray in faith, *Let it be done to me as you have said.* This prayer invites God's Word into our lives. We bear the responsibility to make space for that Word. We must adapt. As we adapt, we become like Jesus, open to the world around us, discovering God in all situations. Because God has blessed us, because God has worked wonders in us, it is possible that *From now on all people will call me blessed.* That openness and discovery urge us to seek God always. As pioneers, our quest is for new life, a life of union with God. With integrity, our lives stand as a question before God, *Don't you know I have been looking for you?* With fidelity, our lives confirm the constancy of our quest. Along the pathways of the spiritual journey we meet others and we share our experiences. Our sharing points always to Jesus, communicating only one message, *Do whatever he tells you.* This message becomes the invitation for yet others to touch the example of Jesus and to wonder before the mystery of God. And so our journey continues, and so their own journey begins.