

“My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:19).

The Lukan picture of Mary, the ideal disciple

This article first appeared in Doctrine and Life (July-August 2023)

For far too long, the typical Catholic picture of Mary has been of a pale-skinned woman in a white silk dress with carefully-groomed blond hair, standing on a pedestal, hands joined, looking heavenward. The Mary of the Gospels, who walked the earth, is a far cry from that. She was an ordinary young woman who listened to the Lord’s request of her, pondered it carefully and discerned the way forward before responding in the affirmative. She lived out that response as a true disciple of the Lord. It is this woman who can also be an example and inspiration to us as we continue on the Synodal Way.

When the documents of Vatican II were being prepared, there was serious discussion about where to put the document on Mary. Many felt that a whole document should be given to her. However, it was finally decided to devote a chapter to her in *Lumen Gentium*, the document on the church, the thinking being that it placed Mary within the doctrine of the church. Despite that, with the decline in traditional devotional practices after the Council, interest in Mary also waned. As he reassessed Mary’s position within the church, Pope Paul VI wrote the apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (1974). In particular he recommended that devotion to Mary should have a biblical basis. He summarised Mary’s role as outlined in scripture.

Mary is held up as an example for the way in which, in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted God’s will (Luke 1:38), because she heard the Word of God and acted on it, and because charity and a spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and most perfect of Christ’s disciples.¹

Thus, he placed the focus on the Mary of the Gospels.

In line with the exhortation, this article will focus on the Mary of Scripture. It will consider the discipleship of Mary, particularly as she appears in the Annunciation (1:26-38) and Visitation (1:39-56) episodes in the Gospel of Luke.

The Annunciation (1:26-38)

Readers first encounter the Lukan Mary in the Annunciation story (1:26-38). A sequential reading of the Gospel alerts them to the fact that this is not the first annunciation in

¹ Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, §37, 1974

Luke; in fact, the first annunciation is to Zechariah (1:10-20). An angel appears to Zechariah, and tells him that he and his wife will have a son, despite the fact that Elizabeth is past child-bearing years. They are both described as righteous (*δίκαιος*); in other words, they are good, upright Jews who obey the *Torah*. Zechariah is a priest and the apparition takes place in the temple, the holiest of places. Contrast that with the story of Mary. She is a teenage girl, from a small unknown town in Galilee, far from Jerusalem, the centre of religious and political power.² She is a virgin and betrothed to a man named Joseph, and so is in a legally binding arrangement to marry him (Deut 22:23). Johnson comments:

She is among the most powerless people in her society: she is young in a society that values age; female in a world ruled by men; poor in a stratified economy. Furthermore she has neither husband nor child to validate her existence. That she should have ‘found favour with God’ and be ‘highly gifted’ shows Luke’s understanding of God’s activity as surprising and often paradoxical, almost always reversing human expectations.³

Therefore, when readers contrast the two annunciations, they find it easier to accept the appearance of Gabriel to the priest, Zechariah and are amazed that an angel appears to this unimportant girl in an unimportant place, well away from the temple and Jerusalem.

The story of the Annunciation begins when the angel greets Mary and tells her she is highly favoured or graced by God. “The whole point of her being ‘favored’ or ‘graced’ is that God chooses her *as she is and will be* – a normal, everyday human female, not some unique, ideal figure that no other woman could approximate.”⁴ This grace or favour is a free outpouring of God’s love to her, not because she deserves it or has earned it in some way but simply because God is love. Therefore, God’s trust in her is a pure gift.

As the story of the Annunciation unfolds, Mary’s response is revealed in three stages. Mary’s immediate reaction to the angel’s message is complete silence; she is perplexed and confused and ponders on the angel’s words. She does not react immediately but spends time thinking through the implications of Gabriel’s words. Gabriel continues by explaining that she will conceive and bear a son who will be the Messiah and will be called Son of the Most High. This concept of pondering on the Lord’s words is very important where Mary is concerned and arises in many of the episodes in which she appears. It is her first reaction at the Annunciation

² In John’s Gospel, Nathaniel asks if anything good can come out of Nazareth (John 1:46).

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*. SP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 39.

⁴ F. Scott Spencer, *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: capable women of purpose and persistence in Luke’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 2.

when she ponders on the words (λόγος) that the angel speaks to her (1:29). After the shepherds' visit (2:19), she treasures the words (ρήμα) they spoke and once again ponders on them in her heart and finally when they return to Nazareth at the end of the Infancy Narrative (2:51), Mary treasures all these things/words in her heart. Throughout her life, Mary continues to ponder and meditate on the Lord's Word.

The second stage of Mary's reaction is when she asks for clarification about how this will happen. The angel tells her "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." This overshadowing by the Spirit was seen at the very beginning of the Book of Genesis when the Spirit (or breath/wind) of God hovered over the waters at the creation. "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light" (Gen 1:2-3). That same creative power of God is evident as the Spirit descends on Mary in this scene.

The climax of the Annunciation is when Mary agrees to the angel's request. She declares herself a slave or servant (δούλη) of the Lord and then accentuates that reply by the use of the emphatic ἰδοὺ. "Look! I am the slave of the Lord" (1:38). Therefore, while this response shows complete obedience, it is also an "active acceptance" and "positive response."⁵ She agrees to be wholeheartedly involved in what God has asked of her.

All this takes place as a result of God's free initiative. As always in biblical portrayals of divine interaction with human beings, divine freedom does not override created freedom but waits upon our free response, which, in a theology of grace, God has already made possible. Hearing the divine call, Mary decides to say yes.⁶

At the end of the Annunciation scene, Mary's discipleship is already obvious. She has listened to the Lord's call, pondered on the Word of the Lord and freely responded to it.

The Visitation (1:39-45)

Immediately after the Annunciation, Mary sets out on a very dangerous journey into the hill country of Judah to visit her cousin Elizabeth. The journey, estimated at around 100 km, would take about five days. It must be remembered that even though she has agreed to the request made of her by the angel, the Annunciation does not take away her humanity. She is a

⁵ Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 115.

⁶ Elizabeth E. Johnson, *Truly our Mother* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 254.

very young woman and the enormity of what she has undertaken must have frightened her. According to Jewish custom of the time, betrothal gave Joseph all the legal rights of a husband even though they were not yet married (Deut 22:23). The dowry had already been paid and the contract was legally binding. Therefore, her pregnancy would be considered adultery. Joseph could divorce her, take a legal case against her for adultery or, if Deuteronomic law was being followed to the letter, she could even be stoned to death. She goes to a woman who will understand. Elizabeth is also having a baby in unusual circumstances (as a barren woman, she was disgraced in her community) and so the two women can support one another in their pregnancies.

When the young unmarried girl and the elderly woman meet however, there is no sense of fear or trepidation, but an overwhelming sense of joy. “Now it happened that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry” (1:41-42).

There are three stages in Elizabeth's greeting to Mary. Mary is never named in this exchange, but is called “blessed among women” (1:42) and “mother of my Lord” (1:45). Elizabeth first blesses Mary, who has been chosen by God for this special task. Secondly, she focuses on Mary as Jesus' mother and her role in bringing salvation to God's people. Elizabeth's blessing is in relation to the child in her womb (*κοιλία*) and implies that Mary's value is inherent in her motherhood. She proceeds to declare that the child is Lord (*κύριος*). So from this first moment that Mary is confirmed as pregnant, the child in her womb is already given the title Lord. In so doing, the evangelist links Jesus' power as Lord with the power of God and heralds the proximate manifestation of Jesus' lordship over death. It is now evident that God's purpose, to bring salvation to his people, is exemplified in Jesus.

The third blessing changes focus from the physical carrying of the child in her womb and concentrates instead on Mary's response to God. Elizabeth says that Mary is blessed because she shows her faith in what the Lord has promised her and trusts in God's action in her life (1:45). Having already accepted the Lord's plan for her (1:38), Elizabeth reiterates Mary's faith and her discipleship in following the Lord's plan. She not only recognises that faith in Mary but also

declares it publicly to everyone who is listening. This is achieved very effectively by changing from the second to the third person in her beatitudes.

1:42	Of all women <u>you</u> are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb
1:44	Blessed is <u>she</u> who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled

The Magnificat (1:46-56)

Mary responds to Elizabeth by praying the Magnificat. She begins by glorifying the Lord with the same sense of joy and rejoicing that was evident in her meeting with Elizabeth. This is a very personal response, ‘my soul’ and ‘my spirit’ signifying that it comes from deep within herself. Despite her humble, insignificant state that was evident in the Annunciation scene and firmly places her among the *anawim*/poor of YHWH, she realises that future generations will call her blessed (1:48). Like the Annunciation, readers are reminded of God’s favour to her, which is a free expression of God’s love.

Mary once again calls herself a servant or slave of the Lord. Thus she foreshadows Jesus’ message of service that permeates this Gospel. “But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (22:26-27).

Mary then moves the focus from herself to encompass all of those in need. She makes a link between what God has done for her (God’s lowly servant) and what he has done for the marginalized. “No reading of the Magnificat can fail to observe a parallel between the “lowly status” of Mary, God’s “Servant” (Luke 1:48), for whom God “has done great things” (v 49) and the “the Lowly,” whom God “has exalted” (v 52), as well as “his servant Israel,” whom God has helped.”⁷⁷

As is so common in Luke’s Gospel, this is shown through the element of reversal. She describes how established power structures will be turned upside down. The Lord will bring down the proud and the powerful and raise up the lowly. He will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. “The Magnificat is the great New Testament song of

⁷⁷ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 69.

liberation - personal and social, moral and economic – a revolutionary document of intense conflict and victory. It praises God’s actions on behalf of the speaker, which are paradigmatic of all of God’s actions on behalf of marginal and exploited people.”⁸ Like her namesake, Miriam in the Book of Exodus, Mary is a prophet who speaks God’s words to the poor and the oppressed. She proclaims the re-ordering of society under God’s rule and foreshadows the mission statement that Jesus proclaims in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (4:18-19).

By the end of the Visitation scene, more aspects of Mary’s discipleship have emerged. She now moves beyond her own situation to spread the Good News and to proclaim that the Kingdom of God reaches out to everyone, especially the poor and the marginalized.

Once Mary’s discipleship is well established at the end of the Visitation passage, the Gospel changes focus in the Birth, Presentation and Finding in the Temple scenes. Mary is now the mother-figure and the spotlight moves to Jesus. He has already been introduced as Lord (1:45) and his roles as Messiah (2:11), light for the Gentiles (2:32), suffering servant (2:34) and Son of the Father (2:49) are all anticipated in the remainder of the Infancy Narrative.

'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!'(11:28)

Mary is scarcely mentioned once Jesus begins his adult ministry (chap 3ff.). She does however, reappear in two short passages when, in two very similar pronouncements, Jesus gives an unambiguous description of discipleship (8:19-21; 11:27-28).

8:21	But he said to them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."
11:28	But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!"

⁸ Jane Schaberg. "Luke." Pages 275-292 in *WBC*. Edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (London: SPCK, 1992), 284.

In the first of these (8:19-21), Mary, called only by the generic term ‘mother,’ is present. However, she and Jesus do not actually meet. Jesus is told that his mother and family are waiting outside to see him and, rather than go out to meet them, he responds by saying “My mother and my brothers and sisters are those who hear the word of God and do it.” He now replaces his biological mother and family with his new family of faith, peopled by those who follow him as disciples. Jesus never actually refers to his own mother as an individual here and her main function in this pericope is as a representative figure so that Jesus can draw out his definition of fictive kinship, which is about response to Jesus’ request to listen to God’s word and act on it. This does not negate Jesus’ mother and family, but rather he broadens out his family to include all those who follow him. “The point is not primarily to exclude Jesus’ mother and brothers and sisters in favour of the others who are present (the disciples), but rather to transform and transfer kinship categories on the basis of a new set of criteria.”⁹ Because of their introduction to Mary in the Infancy Narrative, readers realise that much of what Jesus teaches about discipleship has already been demonstrated by his mother there. She is the first example of someone who hears the word of God and carries it out.

Mary is referenced in the second episode but does not appear there (11:27-28). A woman, in blessing Jesus, praises his mother for bearing him and giving him life. The blessing is a very physical one that, by focusing on the womb and breasts, concentrates on Mary’s maternal role. “Blessed the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked!” (11:27). Once again, Jesus’ reply changes the emphasis. ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’ This seems very harsh on Mary as he seems to dismiss his mother, who physically carried him in her womb. Rather, what he is emphasising is that “hearing the word of God and doing it, with regard to women, is also more highly valued than gender-specified duties and privileges.”¹⁰ Readers have already met this concept in the Visitation scene when Elizabeth, having praised Mary as “mother of my Lord” followed by reminding all present of Mary’s faith in the Lord’s promise.

These two pericopes are Luke’s final references to the mother of Jesus in the Gospel and could be said to be the “climax of his teaching about her.”¹¹ She, who physically carried the

⁹ Seim, *The Double Message*, 67.

¹⁰ Esther A. De Boer, “The Lukan Mary Magdalene and Other Women following Jesus,” in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff, (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 140-160,145.

¹¹ Philip Scott, “A Note on the Meaning and Translation of Luke 11:28,” *ITQ* 41 (1974): 235-250, 250

Lord, is the prime example of those who hear and keep the word of God and, by following her example, others too can become true disciples.

Browne's description of Mary's discipleship summarises it succinctly:

“We have seen that in the annunciation Mary becomes the first disciple, indeed, the first Christian, by hearing the word, i.e., the good news of Jesus' identity as Messiah and God's Son, and by accepting it. In the visitation she hastens to share this gospel word with others, and now in the Magnificat we have her interpretation of that word, resembling the interpretation that her son had given it in the ministry. . . . The first Christian disciple exemplifies the essential task of discipleship. After hearing the word of God and accepting it, we must share it with others, not by simple repeating it but by interpreting so that they can see it truly as good news.”¹²

Mary and the Synodal Pathway

As the church continues on the Synodal Pathway, the Mary of Scripture leads by the example of her discipleship. She was an ordinary young woman who responded to the call of God to participate in a unique way in the journey of salvation. The manner of her response provides a methodology for all who are trying to follow a synodal pathway.

- Listening to the Word of God
- Pondering and Meditating on it
- Responding with a conscious 'yes'
- Reaching out to others to look for support and to tell her story
- Welcoming all on the margins to participate in the journey

The woman who “hears the word of God and does it” is truly “our mother and sister and brother.”

¹² Raymond E. Browne, *A Coming Christ in Advent* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), 69.