

# A Great Sign in Heaven

*Revelation 12*

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This passage in the Revelation of St John articulates in the language of apocalyptic imagery the raw experience of the infant Church fighting for its very life under the impact of state persecution at its most brutal. Revelation tends to meet with a mixed response from contemporary readers. In a sermon on Revelation<sup>1</sup> the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, admits that he finds certain passages in the book disturbing. They remind him of the kind of letters fired off to unsuspecting clergymen by religious cranks. And yet as Dr Williams also acknowledges Revelation contains passages of exquisite poetry in which "all heaven is brought before our eyes".<sup>2</sup> Here we tap into the source of those well-loved Wesley hymns which celebrate the triumph of the risen Christ "whose kingdom is glorious and rules over all".<sup>3</sup>

The vision of the woman "robed with the sun, beneath her feet the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" is in the words of Revelation a sign. This is the same term used by the Fourth Gospel to describe the miracles of Jesus. Unique events which reveal to the inward eye of faith God's revelation of Himself in Christ as the ultimate source of healing and hope. The majestic figure of the woman whose child is threatened by the dragon contains clear echoes of the Genesis story and its promise of salvation in the wake of the Fall.<sup>4</sup> In the Genesis story we learn that the seed of the woman will one day crush the serpent's head. This passage in Genesis is often called the "protevangel". It points forward to the reversal of the tragedy of the fall and the ultimate victory of God's purpose of good for humanity and the whole creation.

The mysterious sign of the woman and her child gathers up within itself these motifs already adumbrated in the Genesis narrative. The woman and child, threatened yet rescued, constitute a sign waiting to be received in faith. The woman represents the Church, the new Israel of God, menaced by the dark forces of oppression and imperial power yet nevertheless miraculously preserved by the hand of God. This sign has been somehow incorporated into the traditional iconography of the Virgin Mary in paintings and carvings. It conveys a powerful sense of the numinous, and inspires wonder.

Recently I found myself chatting to some of our young people as they left the Church hall to go home after taking part in one of our youth organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement* (1991), p 112.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton, *Il penseroso*.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wesley, *Ye servants of God*.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:15.

One of the children, pointing up at the night sky, exclaimed: "Look at the stars! They are my friends," Her face shone with the sheer wonder of God's good creation and the beauty of the starlit sky, "All religion", it has been said, "begins in wonder."<sup>5</sup>

Here, at Walsingham, we contemplate in the image of the Mother of God the mystery of the Incarnation, "The word became flesh."<sup>6</sup> Wonder is evoked by reflecting on the unchanging message entrusted to the Church, that God, without ceasing to be God, became man, and was born of the Virgin Mary. As we listened to the Akathist hymn, and shared in the veneration of the icons of the *Theotokos* with our orthodox friends, I found myself at the close of the worship literally lost for words, overwhelmed by the truth it conveyed, Jesus Christ, our Saviour, true man and very God.

Wonder is linked with joy. Joy in God suffuses this chapter in Revelation. The woman is threatened by the power of evil, but we rejoice when we learn that rescue is on the way and that "the earth helped the woman". History teaches us that the people of God, so often brought to the edge of the abyss, nevertheless win through in the end, persevering in the faith even under the severest trials. "The Church", it has been said, "is an anvil which has worn out many a hammer."<sup>7</sup> Jesus said: "A woman, when she is about to bear a child, is sad because her hour is come, but when she has given birth she forgets straight away her sorrow with joy that a man has come into the world."<sup>8</sup> Although we think of Mary as the Sorrowful Mother standing at the foot of the Cross, she is still "the Joy of all creation".<sup>9</sup>

That joy is rooted in Mary's indispensable role in the incarnation of the Son of God. John Calvin says of her: "Mary opened the way for God to accomplish His work."<sup>10</sup> At the close of a Communion Service a member of my congregation commented: "There was a real atmosphere of joy in that service." This joy of which the New Testament speaks is no passing emotion, but the fruit of prayer and perseverance in faith, not only when the going is good but even when it is not: "Solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion's children know".<sup>11</sup>

Ministering to the grieving and the perplexed is an enormous challenge. We are confronted by the anguished question: "What is God like? Can I be sure that God is love?" We are thrown back on the answer provided by the New Testament and the Catholic Creeds. An answer both profoundly mysterious and starkly simple. God is like Jesus Christ. As Hugh Mackintosh, a Scottish

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<sup>5</sup> H.D.Lewis, *Our Experience of God* (1959).

<sup>6</sup> John 1: 14.

<sup>7</sup> Attributed to the Calvinist theologian, Theodore Beza (1519-1605).

<sup>8</sup> John 16: 21.

<sup>9</sup> The Orthodox Liturgy.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on St Luke 1:42-45* (quoted in Max Thurian, *Mary, Mother of the Lord* (1963)).

<sup>11</sup> John Newton, *Glorious things of Thee are spoken*.

theologian, once phrased it: "Christ is the Father's living portrait."<sup>12</sup> "God", said Bishop Michael Ramsay, "is the Christ-like Father." If we hold on to our belief that Jesus is God incarnate then we can go on holding out the comforting message that the love expressed in the life of Jesus, through His teaching and on His Cross, is the love enthroned at the heart of the universe itself.

Here, at Walsingham, we are united in our common devotion to the Mother of the Lord. The heart of Mary was, as St Luke affirms,<sup>13</sup> an oratory of contemplation and prayer. Prayer was the foundation of her life on earth. We picture her as she joins with the Apostles in prayer as they await the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>14</sup> But prayer is not confined to earth, for it is also the ministry of heaven. In the communion of saints both earth and heaven are united in prayer. As a minister friend of mine was fond of saying: "The Church is made up of the followers of Jesus on earth and in heaven." The figure of the woman "Robed with the sun, crowned with stars, the moon beneath her feet" reminds us that the Church is a praying, interceding Church, not only here, but in heaven itself.

Through our shared commitment to the mystery of the incarnation we open heart and mind to the leading of the Spirit. Fresh insights are exchanged, friendships established, and new discoveries made. Within the fellowship of the Church on earth, and in heaven, we experience the wonder and joy of the risen Jesus Christ, whose love for humanity emblazoned on the Cross is indissolubly at one with "the love that moves the sun and all the other stars".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hugh Mackintosh *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (1912).

<sup>13</sup> Luke 2: 51.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 1: 14.

<sup>15</sup> Dante, *The Paradiso*, the final line.