

The Wisdom of the Mother of God

Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia

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'Blessed rather are those who listen...'

On the walls of the catacombs in Rome, there can be seen depicted the figure of a woman with her hands raised towards heaven in prayer: the *Orans*. Who is she: the human soul, the Church, or the Blessed Virgin Mary? Or is she perhaps all three of these at once? A similar figure of a woman with her hands raised towards heaven is also found in the apse of many Orthodox churches from the Byzantine or post-Byzantine era, and here there is no doubt that she represents the Holy Virgin. The child Christ is often shown within a medallion upon her breast, symbolically indicating his presence within her womb, and so the iconic image has come to be termed 'The Mother of God of the Sign', recalling the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14: 'The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the Virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and you shall call him Emmanuel.' Beside the Theotokos there is sometimes the inscription *Platytera ton Ouranon*, 'Wider than the heavens', a phrase taken from the hymn to the Mother of God in the Divine Liturgy of St Basil the Great:

O full of grace, thou art the joy of all creation,
Of the hierarchy of angels and the human race.
Hallowed temple,
Spiritual paradise,
Glory of virgins,
From thee God took flesh and became a child,
He who is from all eternity our God.
He took thy body as his throne,
Thy womb he made wider than the heavens.
O full of grace, thou art the joy of all creation:
Glory to thee!

This portrayal of Mary as *Orans*, with her hands uplifted in prayerful invocation, waiting expectantly upon the Holy Spirit, expresses exactly the true character of her wisdom. Hers is a silent and obedient wisdom, a wisdom that is vigilant, attentive and receptive; in short, a listening wisdom. Mary is pre-eminently *the one who listens*. She listens to God's word, the word of the Spirit transmitted to her by the angel at the Annunciation; she listens to Jesus her Son through his earthly life; and she also listens here and now, as in every generation, to each one of us when we ask for her prayers.

This aspect of Mary as the one who listens is underlined by the choice of Gospel reading in the Byzantine calendar at many of her feasts, for example on 15 August, 8 September, 1 October and 21 November. The lection is a composite one: Luke 10: 38-42, followed by Luke 11: 27-28. The

opening part of this Gospel reading recounts the story of Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary. Although the Mary in question cannot actually be the Mother of Christ, yet the text has an obvious appropriateness, for Martha's sister Mary is precisely one who listens: 'She sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.' The concluding part of the Gospel reading is at first sight more puzzling. It describes how the woman in the crowd cried out, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you!', after which Jesus seems to rebuke her: 'Blessed rather are those who listen to the word of God and keep it.' When the woman praised his Mother, why did the Saviour apparently disagree with her, suggesting – so some have concluded – that others are in fact more blessed than Mary is? Is this not a paradoxical choice for the Gospel reading at feasts in Mary's honour?

Such an interpretation of Luke 11: 27-28, however, misses the real point. Jesus never said that Mary is not blessed, but he said, 'Blessed *rather...*'. So far from belittling the singular blessedness that is attached to Mary's motherhood, the Lord sought rather to indicate where the true glory of that blessedness is to be found. The woman in the crowd pointed to the *physical* fact of Mary's motherhood: she spoke of the womb that bore Jesus and the breasts that nursed him. Jesus did not deny what she had said, but he looked further, drawing attention to the *inner and spiritual* dimension of Mary's motherhood, without which this physical fact would not have been possible. 'Blessed rather are those who listen...': Mary is not blessed solely because she bore Christ in her body, but more fundamentally she is blessed by virtue of her total and all-embracing devotion to God's word. For, had she not first listened to God's word in her heart and soul, when the angel brought that word to her in Nazareth, she would never have borne the Word of God in her body.

This Scripture reading for Marian feasts, then, affirms – in just the same way as the icon of the *Platytera* – what is the real meaning of the wisdom of the Theotokos. 'Blessed rather are those who listen...': hers is indeed a *listening* wisdom.

'Whatever he tells you – do it'

This attitude of listening to God's word is a *leitmotif* throughout Mary's life. As we have already said, it is manifest in her reply to Gabriel: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me *according to your word*' (Luke 1: 38). In the story of the Annunciation, however, we notice a further feature, fundamentally important for any true appreciation of Mary's wisdom. She listens, but she also responds. Gabriel announces to her God's plan for the salvation of the world, but then he waits for her voluntary consent expressed in her answer: 'Let it be done...'. It was possible for her to refuse. Without the divine initiative the Incarnation could not have taken place; but the Incarnation is also the work of Mary's free will. She is not merely a passive instrument in God's hands but an active participant in the mystery. And we should see in her, not simply a woman who is humbly submissive, but equally a woman who makes a difficult and courageous decision.

This shows that the wisdom displayed by the Virgin is not only obedient but dynamic, not only receptive but creative. Because she listens,

she is also capable of definitive action. Her secret silence empowers her, when the moment of opportunity comes, to respond firmly and decisively. As the one-time Secretary of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld affirms in his remarkable book *Markings*, 'Understand – through the stillness; act – out of the stillness; conquer – in the stillness.' That applies exactly to Mary: she acts out of the stillness, and so her action alters the history of the human race. Her inner wisdom is outward-reaching, and its consequences are not just startling but revolutionary.

Mary's listening wisdom is emphasized also at the end of the Lucan account of the Nativity when it is said after the adoration by the shepherds: 'Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2: 19). A similar phrase occurs after the finding of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple: 'His Mother treasured all these things in her heart' (Luke 2: 51) – treasured them even though as yet she did not understand their full import. Such is her wisdom: a treasuring, pondering, reflective wisdom, but also a wisdom that is bold, practical and decisive in its outward consequences.

The same insistence on the value of listening is evident in the account of the marriage at Cana in Galilee. 'Whatever he tells you – do it' (John 2: 5), says Mary to the servants at the wedding feast. There are very few sayings ascribed to Mary in Holy Scripture; and so, whenever she does speak, her words are immeasurably precious. And that is particularly the case in the present instance, for this is her final recorded utterance in the New Testament, her last will and testament (as it were) to humankind. This, then, is what she says, addressing not just the servants at the wedding feast but each one of us personally: 'Be attentive to what my son tells you. Open your ears. *Listen.*'

After that, so far as the written testimony of the New Testament is concerned, there is on Mary's part only silence. We know that she stood at the foot of the Cross (John 19: 25), and that she was with the apostles, praying in the Upper Room immediately before Pentecost (Acts 1: 14). But what, if anything, she said on those two occasions we are not told. Yet she was certainly present: listening to her Son when he spoke from the Cross to her and to the beloved disciple: 'Woman, behold your son... behold your mother' (John 19: 26–27); waiting on the Paraclete when he descended in tongues of fire (Acts 2: 3).

Incidentally, it is surely regrettable that, despite the clear statement in Acts 1: 14, in most Orthodox icons of Pentecost the Mother of God is not included. There is a space in the middle between the two chief apostles, but all too often that space is left empty. In icons of the Ascension, by contrast, Mary occupies a central place. Fortunately, however, in what is considered to be the earliest surviving depiction of the descent of the Holy Spirit – in the Syriac Gospels copied around 586 by the scribe Rabbula – the Theotokos is definitely present, standing in the midst of the apostles. Would that it were always so! For is not Mary truly a Pentecostal figure? Within the total community of the People of God is she not *par excellence* the Spirit-bearer?

Panagion and Panagia

The special link between the Pentecostal Spirit and the Blessed Virgin Mary, who in her receptive wisdom waits expectantly upon the Paraclete, is illuminated by the way in which, throughout the liturgical texts, the same adjective 'all-holy' is applied in a particular and specific way to both of them. This is something that was emphasised by the Russian émigré theologian Paul Evdokimov (1901–70). The Spirit is called *Panagion* (the neuter form), while the Mother of God bears the title *Panagia* (the feminine form).

Here let us reflect for a moment upon a difficulty that all of us have surely encountered. It is difficult to speak about the Holy Spirit, hard to think and talk about him in concrete and explicitly personal terms. We feel his nearness and are conscious of his power, but we do not see his face. He is 'everywhere present and filling all things', as we say in the prayer *Heavenly King*, yet he remains somehow elusive and anonymous. This is strikingly expressed by St Symeon the New Theologian (959–1022) in his *Invocation to the Holy Spirit*, with its constant refrain 'Come, come, come'. Here he terms the Spirit 'hidden mystery... treasure without name... reality beyond all words... person beyond all understanding... invisible, whom none may touch or handle'. Emphasising the strange antinomy in our experience of the Spirit – uniquely close to us yet always mysterious – Symeon continues: 'Come, for your name fills our hearts with longing and is ever on our lips; yet who you are and what your nature is, we cannot say or know.'

Now the reason for this apophatic quality in the third person of the Trinity is easily appreciated if we think about the relationship between the Spirit and the Son, as set forth in Christ's Farewell Discourse at the Last Supper in John, chapters 14–17. Here Jesus teaches that the special and characteristic task of the Spirit is to bear witness to the Son: 'He will not speak on his own account... He will take what is mine and will declare it to you' (John 16: 13–14). Such is the distinctive *diakonia* of the third person of the Trinity: with kenotic transparency he shows us not his own face but that of Christ. He points always to Another.

In this context we may apply to the Spirit the analogy employed by Gerard Manley Hopkins, when he compares the Blessed Virgin to the air we breathe:

Wild air, world – mothering air,
Nestling me everywhere...
Be thou then, O thou dear
Mother, my atmosphere.

In a similar way, the Spirit is also our 'atmosphere'. Through the medium of the air we apprehend objects and hear sounds, but we do not see the air itself. It discloses other things to us, it is our means of communication, but – except when polluted – it does not draw attention to itself; we cannot perceive it on its own and in separation from the sights and sounds that it mediates to us. So likewise the Spirit reveals Christ to us and enables us to hear the Saviour's words, but through an act of continual *kenosis* he veils his own self and hides his face. He is exactly our means of communication, 'the go-between God', to use the phrase of Bishop John V. Taylor, the self-effacing intermediary.

St John of Damascus (c.675–c.749) develops this point by observing that the Son is the image of the Father, while the Spirit is the image of the Son. From this it follows that within the Trinity itself, there is no one who acts as the image of the Spirit. Where, then, are we to discover the Spirit's image? Using the parallel between *Panagion* and *Panagia*, Evdokimov answers: In the person of the Virgin Mary. She, the All-holy One, is the living icon of the All-Holy Spirit. In this way it becomes evident that the third person of the Trinity does indeed have a particular image, an icon that reflects and manifests him in a distinctive way; but this image is to be found, not within the Trinity itself, but within the Church. It is to be found in the communion of saints, and supremely in the one who is first among God's holy ones, in the greatest of all the Spirit-bearers, Mary the Mother of God.

To understand better, then, who the Spirit is, what he does, what is his grace and his transforming power in our hearts and in the world, let us look first and foremost at Mary. Here we will discover revealed to us the Spirit's face, which previously seemed to be occluded. The Holy Spirit never became incarnate, but he possesses in the person of the Virgin Mary the peculiar and unique temple of his presence. As is affirmed in the *kontakion* for the Feast of the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple (21 November), 'She is indeed the heavenly Tabernacle' – the Tabernacle, more specifically, of the Holy Paraclete.

So, therefore, as the one who listens, whose hands are lifted expectantly to heaven in prayer, who with receptive wisdom waits upon the Spirit, she is for us a true and living icon of the third person of the Triune God.

'In her intercession lies unfailing hope'

Mary does not, however, listen only to God the Holy Spirit, but she listens also to us. This her unceasing intercession for the world is a master-theme in all Marian theology and devotion, whether Eastern or Western. For Russian Orthodox it is summed up especially in the icon of the *Pokrov* or the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God (the feast falls on 1 October). Her intercessory role reaffirms what we have already noticed when speaking of the Annunciation: that, while her wisdom is hidden deep within the secret silence of her heart, it is at the same time an outward-reaching wisdom, overshadowing the whole creation. It is not merely passive but active, not merely receptive but transformative; for within the universe there is nothing so forceful as the prayer of intercession.

This intercessory ministry of the Theotokos is highlighted in the hymns used at the Feast of her Dormition or Falling Asleep (15 August). Although assumed into heaven in both her soul and her body, she is not thereby separated from the world – so it is affirmed in the liturgical texts – but she continues to be one with us through her unceasing prayer. As is said in the *troparion* (*apolytikion*) of the Feast:

In giving birth, O Theotokos, thou hast retained thy virginity,
And in falling asleep thou hast not forsaken the world.
Thou who art the Mother of Life hast passed over into life,
And by thy prayers thou dost deliver our souls from death.

The *kontakion* of the Feast speaks in similar terms:

Neither the tomb nor death had power over the Theotokos:
 She is ever watchful in her prayers,
 And *in her intercession lies unfailing hope.*

St Cosmas the Melodist (c.675–c.751), developing this line of thought, envisages Mary as a bridge and bond uniting heaven and earth (Matins, Second Canon, Canticle Eight):

As she departed, the Virgin without spot lifted up her hands to heaven –
 Those hands that had held God incarnate in their embrace –
 And with the boldness of a Mother to her Son she said:
 ‘Keep unto all ages those whom thou hast made mine.’

We who have come as pilgrims to Mary's Holy House here at Walsingham have particular reason to keep in mind this ceaseless prayer of Mary on our behalf. Why have we journeyed to this place? There can be but one compelling reason: to bring our requests to the Mother of God, that she may convey them to her Son. As we do so, let us not forget the warning of St Gregory the Theologian (329–89): ‘Do not waste God's time by asking for things that are trivial and unimportant.’ Let us offer our prayers rather in the spirit of Father Faber:

You are coming to a King:
 Large petitions with you bring.

As we approach with these ‘large petitions’, there are two titles that we may find apposite, which are attached in the Russian tradition to particular icons of the Theotokos: ‘The Mother of God Joy of all who sorrow’, and ‘The Mother of God of unexpected joy’. *Joy of all who sorrow*: may Mary bring joy to those of us here present who have come to Walsingham with heavy burdens and inner weeping. *Unexpected joy*: often the best things that happened in our lives are those that we do not plan and foresee, but that come to us out of the blue, unlooked-for. A pilgrimage should be a time of surprises: may it be so for you and me during these days at England's Nazareth.

There is one thing above all for which we can all pray. Through the intercessions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, may we learn to hear the word of God and keep it as she did. May she show us how to enter more profoundly into the depths of our own inwardness, there to wait upon the Holy Spirit with receptive vigilance. May she grant us a share in the creative silence of her wisdom. May she teach us to *listen*. And after we have listened, may she also bestow on us the grace and power to *act*.