

Our Lady: 'Star of the Sea'

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How does Mary like to be worshipped? You will adore her most acceptably if you imitate her.¹

In 1526, the Catholic humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus wrote ten colloquies, designed to show the absurdity not of religious devotion itself but of some popular practices and superstitions of his time in England. One of them contains a fictitious account of a pilgrimage made by an imaginary interlocutor to Walsingham, along with one to St Thomas at Canterbury, such a choice indicating, incidentally, the very high place given to Walsingham at the time. It is witty, though there is nothing more difficult to understand than what made our predecessors laugh. For instance, Calvin wrote a treatise against relics with a more thorough sense of condemnation than anything Erasmus imagined, and there also, the ridicule seems to us heavy and laboured; but to mock something is the easiest way to discredit it.

Unlike Calvin, Erasmus had a serious love of Mary, and it was in fact this that caused him to make the remarks he did. Twelve years later, his purifying mockery had changed in other hands to destruction: in 1538 the priory of the Augustinian canons at Walsingham was dissolved; the shrine, so much frequented by royalty up to and including Henry VIII and Catherine, was closed. The famous twelfth-century statue of Our Lady with the Child had already been removed from the shrine and was burnt in Chelsea. Today I think we would see this as sacrilege and less than human and so it seems not inappropriate to recall the verses of a poem on a later twentieth-century displacement of a statue described contemptuously by the destroyers as 'a female figure with a child':

When that the Eternal deigned to look
On us poor folk to make us free
He chose a Maiden, whom He took
From Nazareth in Galilee;
Since when the Islands of the Sea,
The Field, the City, and the Wild,
Proclaim aloud triumphantly
'A Female Figure with a Child'.

Prince Jesus, in mine agony,
Permit me, broken and defiled,
Through blurred and glazing eyes to see
'A Female Figure with a Child'.²

Mary is always precisely that: a female figure with a child, but the love Christians have for her is always more than that; she is there in death and

¹ Desiderius Erasmus, 'A Pilgrimage for Religion's Sake,' translated Craig R. Thompson, in *Ten Colloquies of Erasmus*, New York, 1957, no. vi, p.78.

² Hilaire Belloc, 'Ballade of Illegal Ornaments', *Collected Poems*.

life and birth and love and joy and sorrow, through the great glories of incarnation and redemption. Standing in this place today we feel we are among a great cloud of witnesses who have made this love of Mary and Jesus her child an integral part of the pilgrimage of life. In that context I want to do a rather simple thing: we have to do what we can, not what we can't and I do not pretend to do more than find some glimpses of the beginnings of this love of Mary in the very earliest days of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England, around 600-700.

Let me begin by saying that I have found no evidence of an early Anglo-Saxon shrine at Walsingham. The importance of Walsingham as a shrine to Mary throughout the later Middle Ages is certain. Dr John Dickinson in his book of Walsingham³ has shown conclusively that the history of the foundation of the shrine by Richeldis belongs in form and content to the twelfth century (c.1153), in fact to England neither Anglo-Saxon, or Norman but under the Plantagenets. It seems likely that, during the Second Crusade (1147-8), Geoffrey, Richeldis' son, had been to Nazareth and had seen what was said to be the holy house of Mary and Joseph. Pilgrims had seen such a place earlier (there is at least one account of it known in 7th-century England) but it was not until the twelfth century that devotion turned towards the re-establishing in Europe of places seen in the east, one of the most notable being the Holy House of Loreto.

This concern for the actual places in the Holy Land marked a decisive change in spirituality in the twelfth century: people had been there; and they began to expand the early concern for the great theme of redemption with interest in the human aspects of the man of Galilee, his mother, the places, the human faces of Jesus and of Mary. This makes sense of the establishment in the mid-twelfth century of a replica here of the house of Mary at Nazareth: some people had been there, most would never go, but the same sense of coming into the home of Jesus and Mary could be found at Walsingham.

In what sense is the holy house of Walsingham related to the house of the Virgin Mary in Galilee? As historians, neither I nor John Dickinson nor Erasmus can say that this *is* the holy house of Nazareth, brought by miracle to England in the earliest days of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. A later confusion with the legend of the House at Loreto (a story confused in itself) has caused this to be thought at times, and this was one of the things that worried Erasmus, with his sharp modern apprehension of the perspective of the past and his awareness of the mechanics of events. Certainly such thinking was not part of the early establishment of shrines; the Middle Ages did not ask 'how did this happen?' they asked 'what is there in this for me now, today?' What mattered to them was not the historicity of things and places but the utility of them for following Christ here and now, and in this following they went to other shrines of Our Lady, but not in Anglo-Saxon times, to Walsingham.

What can I find to say from the earliest sources about the relationship of Mary to the English? In the early period of the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon church, there remains very little evidence about a special cult of Mary. On a negative side, the name 'Mary' was rarely if ever adopted by Anglo-Saxon converts but neither were the names of the apostles. This does not

³ John C. Dickinson, *The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham*, Cambridge, 1956.

indicate a lack of love for Mary. It simply shows that the Anglo-Saxons were conservative about names. They kept obstinately to their fairly unpronounceable Germanic names: Aethelberht, Sexwulf and even Werewolf remained as the names of bishops into the tenth century. This is in line with the fact that they were not at all ready to adopt new names for the week. The day of Mars, Twi, Woden, Thor, Fri and Saturn, the old Scandinavian hierarchy of gods, was good enough for them and they did not alter them to the Christian ferias. Easter itself stayed (and still stays) named after the goddess Eostore and Lent is simply the Old English name for Spring; neither *pasch* nor *jejunium* replaced them. So it is not surprising that people were cautious in daily life about names from the new religion. It was also rare, though not unknown, for religious houses or churches to be dedicated to Mary in the 6th-7th centuries.

So how did the first Anglo-Saxon converts know, and what did they know, about Mary, during this period from the coming of Augustine and Aidan to the sack of Lindisfarne by the Vikings? There is little enough to go on and it is worth bearing in mind that in a sophisticated, but non-reading, culture what was seen and heard was what mattered most; and such communication does not leave as many traces as written records. They knew about Mary of course first of all from the liturgy. Four great feasts of Mary had been established in Rome in the seventh century and popularised in the west under the Byzantine influence of Pope Sergius (687- 701): the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the Assumption of Mary, the Annunciation and the Nativity. In each case Mary was associated with Christ, and all four were celebrated in England and included by Bede in his martyrology. At the liturgy you would hear about Mary; in church you might see pictures of her.

There are few remaining early Anglo-Saxon pictures of Mary, but those there are confirm the idea of her as being seen only in the context of the Gospel and with her Son. Mary is shown as offering Christ to the viewer. The earliest description is a reference to a picture of Mary which does not now exist. Bede says that in the church at Wearmouth, Jarrow, there was "an image of the blessed Mother of God and ever Virgin Mary, and also of the twelve apostles"⁴ which, he says, had been brought back from Rome by Benedict Biscop and placed in the church in the fashion of a Roman basilica. In the *Book of Kells* there is a depiction of Mary with the child, both seated and looking at each other; Mary here has no halo.⁵ Thirdly, on the coffin of St Cuthbert in Durham, Mary is drawn as seated with the Child, both facing the beholder, their bodies at an angle, Christ with a cruciform halo, giving a blessing.⁶ On an ivory casket in the British Museum, the Franks casket, (c700) Mary is shown as seated on a throne holding and presenting the Child to the Magi.⁷ There are also three representations of Mary carved on the Ruthwell Cross, the oldest surviving stone cross, all of which are taken from scripture and/or the liturgy: the meeting with Elizabeth, the Annunciation,

⁴ Bede, 'Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow' translated by D.H.Farmer, in *The Age of Bede*, Harmondsworth, 1965 Cap 6, pp. 190-191.

⁵ Now in Dublin, Trinity College Library, cf. Francois Henry, *The Book of Kells*, London, 1974, plate 10.

⁶ Made c 698 at Lindisfarne, now in Durham Cathedral Library cf. C.F.Battiscombe, *The Relics of St Cuthbert*, Oxford, 1956.

⁷ Franks Casket, now in the British Museum, illustrated in J.Beckwith, *Ivory Carving in Early medieval England*, London, 1972, no.1, plates 3-7.

the flight into Egypt. The great Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, is inscribed in runes on the Ruthwell Cross, in which the tree of the cross is paralleled at one point with Mary:

Heaven's king exalted me above
all other trees, just as Almighty God
raised up his mother Mary for all men
above all other women in the world.⁸

Mary was known also because she was mentioned in sermons, notably in sermons by the greatest scholar of his day, the Venerable Bede. In his sermons, Bede dealt carefully with scripture texts and he provided the first known sermon anywhere for the feast of the Purification; his Advent homilies comment also on the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Magnificat.⁹ There may well have been other texts and private prayers to Mary but it was not until the 10th century that there are records of the ardent Marian devotion which created them. There is however one prayer in particular from this very early period which is well worth noting:

We beseech thee, O Lord, pour thy grace into our hearts that as we have known the Incarnation of Christ thy Son. by the message of an angel, so by His cross and Passion we may be brought to the glory of His Resurrection

This was a prayer brought to England in the seventh century from Rome by John the Archchanter and it is still in use as a collect for the feast of the Annunciation, significantly linking Mary and the Incarnation with the Passion of Christ.¹⁰

This very discrete, biblical and liturgically based love of the Mother of Jesus grew slowly and in at least two stories of the times, it seems as if English Christians did not automatically know how to venerate the mother of God. Bishop Wilfrid had to be told in a dream to acknowledge the help of the Virgin and build her a church.¹¹ The English nun Leoba, the close friend of Boniface in the mission of the English to Germany, had to be told to ask help of Mary in a thunderstorm and to consecrate a chapel to her thereafter.¹²

So the image of Mary for this early period was scriptural and firmly theological; she was the God-bearer, always with her Son. Let me turn now to two titles for Mary which the Anglo-Saxons gave her: 'Our Lady' and 'Star of the Sea'.

For the earliest Anglo-Saxon Christians in art, liturgy, in preaching and in prayer, Mary was seen as presenting her Son and it seems to me significant that the Anglo-Saxon title for Mary was 'lady'. The word 'lady'

⁸ 'Dream of the Rood' trans. Richard Hamer in *Anglo-Saxon Verse*, Faber, 1970, p.167. For the Ruthwell Cross, see Eammon O'Carragain, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition*, British Library, 2005.

⁹ Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, translated L T Martin and D Hurst, Kalamazoo, 1991 vol. 1, Homilies 1-4.

¹⁰ Collect for the Annunciation BCP. cf from *Ritual to Rood* op cit. pp. 355-368.

¹¹ Eddius Stephanus *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* edited and translated B.Colgrave, Cambridge 1927, p 122.

¹² Rudolf, 'Life of St Leoba'. in *Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, translated C.H.Talbot, London, 1954, pp. 219-220.

comes from Old English *hlaidige*; the first part of the word is *laif*, loaf, bread, as in the corresponding *hlaford*, lord; the second part is usually taken to be from the root *dig-*, to knead, to break, to form in this sense, Mary is indeed 'Lady', the maker and giver of bread. This use is continued in the phrases 'Lady Day' and 'Lady Chapel' where the word is properly a genitive, representing *hlaefdigian*, the chapel of the bread-giver. That bread which is Christ's body broken and given for the life of the world is seen as the special gift of His mother who is 'our Lady', because she brought forth the body of Christ from her body, as the bread of heaven.

Mary was linked with water as well as bread by the title 'Star of the sea'. Here at Walsingham there is a holy well, a spring of water. Is there anything that indicates an interest in water earlier, connecting it with Nazareth and Mary? There is an account, well-known in England in the seventh century, of a pilgrimage made to Nazareth by Arculf, a bishop of Gaul, who had visited the Holy Land and had told Adamnan, the abbot of Lindisfarne, about it, and who passed the information to King Aldfrith who told Bede, who wrote it down. Bede has this to say about the source of his information:

Bishop Arculf was renowned for his longing for the holy places; he forsook his own country and went to the promised land. After he had lingered some months in Jerusalem and had employed an experienced monk, Peter, as his guide and interpreter, he eagerly travelled by a circuitous route to all the places he had longed to see, ... But when he wanted to return to his own country the boat on which he was sailing was carried to our island, that is Britain. After many diversions caused by a contrary wind, at last, having faced not a few dangers, he reached the aforementioned venerable man, Adamnan. In recounting his journey and describing the places he had seen, he showed Adamnan how to write a charming narrative.¹³

This account, in Bede's work, called *On the Holy Places*, had its origin, then, with an otherwise unknown monk, Peter, in Palestine in the fifth century, who had acted as a guide for a western tourist; his words and the tourist's observations were passed on, coming from a Gallic bishop to an Irish abbot, who then gave them to an Anglo-Saxon king and so they came to the quiet monk-scholar of Wearmouth-Jarrow. Bede saw Adamnan's 'on the Holy Places', *De Locis Sanctis*, not as a guide book for pilgrims but as an exegetical tool for understanding the scriptures here and now for each reader today. It contains a description of Nazareth and the holy house and significantly there was at once a description of water there:

There are two very large churches in Nazareth, one in the centre of the city, raised on two piles, where once upon a time was the house in which our Lord and Saviour was brought up. It is supported on two mounds with arches between them and there is a very clear fountain underneath between the mounds. The whole community of citizens come to draw water from it, and from the same source vessels of water are passed up to the church itself.¹⁴

In an Anglo-Saxon homily, this theme of water, the life-living, cleansing and baptising element, is linked to Mary and she is called the 'star

¹³ Bede, *On the Holy Places*, translated Foley and Holder, in *Bede: A Bible Miscellany*, Liverpool texts for translators, 1999, pp.1-25.

¹⁴ Adamnan's *De Locis Sanctis*, edited and translated Denis Meehan, 1983, Dublin, Book 2, cap.26, pp.95-6.

of the sea', a title first found in Jerome, and adopted by Bede, who combined it with the title of 'lady' in the following way:

Mary in Hebrew is called 'star of the sea' and in Syriac 'lady' and rightly because she gave birth to the Lord of all the world who is the perpetual light for the age.¹⁵

Both of these titles and the description of Nazareth by Adamnan and Bede, fit Walsingham: even in the 16th century, she was 'Our Lady, Star of the Sea' to Erasmus: the one who gives the bread of heaven, the light shining out of the darkness of this world.

These two titles remind us that historians and theologians do not have the whole truth. Christianity is not just an intellectual matter of immense complexity nor is it unnaturally harsh and cold. It is basic, physical, it depends on the elements essential to human life: bread and water. And in this imagination, poetry, seeing with the heart, are essential. Given a readiness to have our eyes open to glory, there are practical, simple ways of living it out, in company with Jesus and Mary. These ways are linked to the basic human life of work, sleep, eating, breathing, walking. Each moment can change us; imperceptibly we can be made more like Christ, who is total love. It is this gift of Love which is the body of Christ, the bread offered to us by Our Bread-giver Mary, that is, by human hands, which will unite us to one another and lead to the heavenly banquet, the supreme delight and fulfilment of all longing. All this is not just for the clever, the ascetic nor is it only for the well-behaved and good. It is for all, and at all times.

To quote now from John Donne,

We ask for 'daily bread' and God never says you should have come yesterday, he never says you must come again tomorrow, but today if you will hear his voice, he will hear you. God brought light out of darkness not out of a lesser light; he can bring thy summer out of winter though thou have no spring; though in the ways of fortune or understanding or conscience thou have been benighted till now, wintered and frozen, clouded and eclipsed, damped and benumbed, smothered and stupefied till now, now God comes to thee, not as in the dawning of the day, not as in the bud of spring, but as the sun at noon to illustrate all shadows, as the sheaves in harvest to fill all penuries, all occasions invite his mercies and all times are his seasons¹⁶

It was the custom from the earliest days of the church for people to bring bread and wine forward to the altar for them to be used in the sacrament of the Eucharist. This action can be seen as another pilgrimage, our simple 'yes' to the call of God. A comparison was drawn by the great seventeenth-century preacher, Launcelot Andrewes, between this and the story told by Matthew of the 'pilgrimage' of the Wise Men to Bethlehem: (Matthew 2: 1-12) which could be linked to the Anglo-Saxon engraving of Mary and the Child and the Magi on the Franks casket in the British Museum.

To quote now from Lancelot Andrewes:

¹⁵ Bede, *In Lucae Evangelium Expositio* edited D.Hurst p.31.

¹⁶ John Donne *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, edited John Hayward, Nonesuch Press, London, 1929. Sermon 2, pp.586-7.

And now what shall we do? In the old ritual of the church we find that on the cover of the sacrament of his body there was a star engraven, to show us that now the star leads us thither to his body there. And what shall I say but according as St John saith, and the star and the wise men, say, 'come' and He whose the star is and to whom the wise men came saith 'come'. And let them that are disposed come, and let whosoever will take of the bread of life which came down from heaven this day in Bethlehem the house of bread of which bread the church is this day the house, the true Bethlehem and all the Bethlehem we have now left to come to for the bread of life and this our nearest coming that here we can come until, by another *venite* come unto Him in His heavenly kingdom.¹⁷

In coming here to this holy place of Mary, we are heirs to both theological correctness of thinking combined with the emotion of the loving human heart. God is always *for* us and while we recognise the seriousness of the undertaking of pilgrimage, of being in company with one another and with Christ and his mother. This does not diminish the glory and joy of the end, or prevent it from being reflected in the delights of the way itself. In any way of walking with the Lord there has to be an element, however small, of wanting somehow to go away from the old self and towards a fullness of life, and this has its own hardships, but the basic orientation of walking with Christ on any pilgrimage lies in a joyful sense of going out freely in good company with a shared aim, and the aim and the reward of the way is to find that place which is where we receive God, and therefore for us this is truly the holy house, both Bethlehem and Nazareth. Most of all, it is our home: there is here the water of life and the bread of heaven, here Mary is Our Lady, Our star of the sea. 'How does Mary like to be worshipped? You will adore her most acceptably if you imitate her'.

And to end with, a poem by G.K.Chesterton:

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden,
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.¹⁸

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¹⁷ Lancelot Andrewes, *Ninety Six Sermons, Works*, vol. 1 Oxford, 1841, pp. 243-7.

¹⁸ G.K.Chesterton, 'The House of Christmas', *Collected Poems of G.K.Chesterton*, London, 1933, p.140.