

At the Cross

John 19: 25-27

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Introduction: The Gospel according to John.

THE earliest witness to the authorship of the Fourth Gospel is Irenaeus of Lyons, writing ca.180 A.D., who tells us that it was produced at Ephesus by John the disciple of the Lord:

Afterwards (i.e. after the writing of the other Gospels) John, the disciple of the Lord, who also reclined on his bosom, published his Gospel, while staying at Ephesus in Asia.¹

Irenaeus appears to have based his teaching on his recalling the teaching of Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, whom he had heard as a young man, and Polycarp had known the apostle John himself.²

Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, writing ca.190 A.D. to Pope Victor of Rome, confirms that John the Apostle had lived and died in Ephesus, though he does not directly mention the Gospel. Papias of Hierapolis (ca.130 A.D.) seems also to have favoured authorship by John the Apostle. If John's Gospel is the work of a Palestinian Jew who was an eyewitness of its events (John. 19: 35) as internal evidence strongly suggests (John. 5: 2, 19:13, etc.), we have every reason to believe that the author was (as the Gospel itself and constant Church tradition claim) John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee—that same John who, as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" stood near to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, at the cross of her Son.

Reflection.

It was an immortal scene:

At the cross, her station keeping,
Stood the mournful Mother, weeping,
close to Jesus at the last.³

In English parish churches, before the Protestant Reformation, and briefly afterwards, when they were restored in the reign of Queen Mary Tudor, there stood or hung above

¹ Adv. Haer. 3.1, I; PG7.844

² Ep. ad Flor. in Eusebius HE. 5.20,4; PG. 20.485

³ Stabat Mater dolorosa: *English Hymnal* 115, v.1

the great Rood Screen, at the approach to the sanctuary of the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ, an image of the crucified Christ on the cross of Calvary with his Mother and the Beloved Disciple on either side, watching. There they watched "the Victim languish, for his people's sins, in anguish, bleed in torments, bleed and die".⁴

The scene was taken up in icons, and was an image again restored in the now Anglican parish churches in the great Anglo-Catholic Revival in England in the late 19th and early 20th century. It was, and is, an immortal scene, at the heart of the church, and we can see just such an image in the Walsingham Church of St. Mary and All Saints today.

The tradition of Mary as a Type of the Church gathered around the cross may well have found its ritual effect in the fact that so many church buildings were dedicated to Mary, for these buildings were looked upon as symbols of the Church as a whole.

Throughout the realm of the visible Church, buildings were dedicated to Mary from quite early times. They stand out as a monumental embodiment of Mary's veneration thus made visible to all eyes. Nearly all liturgists consider God's house to be the material image of Christ's Church and a symbol of Our Lord's Body. But the equivalence of Mary and Ecclesia was certainly one reason for the innumerable consecrations to Mary and at the same time served the purpose of establishing a definite place for Mary in the material realm of architecture.⁵

In the scene at the foot of the Cross, in John's Gospel, we see a "model" of the Church. The faithful disciples and the followers of Jesus gathered round him on the Cross – in love for him, their "Redeemer, Friend and Brother"⁶ — as he offered the sacrifice of God's love for all humanity on the Cross of Calvary, which we continue to celebrate sacramentally in communion with them (as St. Paul put it: "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you shew forth the Lord's death until he comes" (I Corinthians 11: 26)—and as we now gather, in adoration of the victorious Saviour, the Son of God and Son of Man, around his Eucharistic Presence in the bloodless sacrifice of the Eucharistic mystery and its devotional extension in this Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

In the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) the final chapter in the Constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) was devoted to Our Lady. A separate document about her was contemplated but the Council fathers, after much discussion, decided that she should not be treated in isolation. They preferred to link her role more closely with that of the

⁴ *English Hymnal* 115 v.4

⁵ V.G.Halbricht, *Maria* (1926) p 35

⁶ Prayer of St. Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)

Church.⁷ And they were surely right. Mary must be seen as playing a vital part in the work of the Church. After all, she was intimately connected with it since the Church is the mystical body of Christ. She is thus the mother of the Church as the Council indicated.

Taught by the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Church honours her with filial affection and piety as a most devoted mother.⁸

The Council also wanted to emphasise Mary's part in the work of salvation. It states:

The union of the mother with her son in the work of salvation was manifested from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death.⁹

It also urges theologians and preachers of the divine word that in treating of the unique dignity of the Mother of God they carefully and equally avoid the falsity of exaggeration on the one hand and the excess of narrow-mindedness on the other. The answer is to see Mary as she appears in Scripture. And to this we now turn.

John 19: 25 - 27: There standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

We have here the tantalizing question of the identities of the women at or in sight of the Cross (in all four Gospels). Four women were at the Cross, according to John:

1. Mary, Mother of Jesus,
2. Jesus's mother's sister,
3. Mary, the wife of Clopas,
4. Mary Magdalene.

Who were they and why were they there?

The women mentioned were significant in at least two ways, as:

- (i) Mothers of important sons
- (ii) Women disciples.

(i) Mothers of "important sons":

Jesus was the most important of them all. James, if he is the brother of Jesus who was intended in the synoptic versions, was the leader of the Jerusalem Church. According to Hegesippus, Clopas was the brother of Mary's husband, Joseph (a detail that could be

⁷ As the late (Cardinal) Avery Dulles, SJ, pointed out in his introductory comments on Lumen Gentium (W.M. Abbott p.13).

⁸ Lumen Gentium 53

⁹ Lumen Gentium 57

deduced from John's text), and the father of its second leader, Symeon.¹⁰ The mother of Jesus also became the mother of the Beloved Disciple, another prominent apostle. Albeit without the name Mary, another woman at the cross, in Matthew's version, was the 'mother of the sons of Zebedee', also 'pillars' (cf. Galatians 2: 9; Acts 12: 2) of the early Church.

As Chris Maunder suggests:¹¹

The names cannot be incidental to the story. Their inclusion in the narrative marks them out as leading figures in the Church that remembers the Passion. Whilst John's Beloved Disciple is the only male disciple mentioned as being present, the other prominent disciples are represented by their mothers or wives, this being true to the synoptic tradition that women were present within sight of the cross while the men had fled.

As far as can be determined, like the Passover in the Jewish tradition; the Passion will have been recounted in the early Church, and its telling associated with the Eucharist (this still occurs today in Holy Week services, of course). Hengel suggested that Jesus's saying in Mk. 14: 9, that the anointing women would be remembered wherever the gospel was preached, was an allusion to the fact that this story remained part of the oral telling of the Passion story in the liturgical setting.¹² The names of the women at the cross, too, would have been part of the retelling tradition. On the evidence of the Gospels, the names of their sons will have varied, according to the community that was passing on the story. Clopas's inclusion may have come later than James's, as his prominence seems to have become important with the establishment of his son as Jerusalem leader after James's death.¹³

Therefore we may have more than just a literary, mythological and scriptural basis for the figure of Mary that we find in the Gospels. We may also have a liturgical one.

The confusion over the identity of the women at or near the cross does suggest an earlier pre-Gospel stratum to this tradition. The fact that women were normally associated with death and burial does not necessarily diminish the significance of the names which, linked to various important apostles, may have held special liturgical meaning for certain early Christian communities.

(ii) Women disciples:

With the exception of (4) Mary Magdalene—her name identifying her as a Galilean from Magdala, and who is introduced into the Gospels as a witness of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus—it is uncertain whether the synoptic evangelists and John intend to name the same women.

¹⁰ Eusebius: *History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Penguin 1965, 123 - 4: 3.11; 142 - 3: 3. 32; 181 - 2: 4.21 and R. Bauckham, *Gospel Women* (2002) pp. 209-211 deduces Mary of Clopas was Symeon's mother.

¹¹ *Cult of the Virgin Mary* (2008), pp. 31 - 32

¹² M. Hengel: *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (1985) p. 541

¹³ cf. C. Maunder (2007) in *Mary, the Complete Resource*. pp. 11- 46

(2) His mother's sister—may well be Salome (Mark's Gospel), the mother of the sons of Zebedee (Matthew's Gospel). If so, then the evangelist John would be the cousin of Jesus. But the New Testament normally distinguishes between James (the son of Zebedee) and another James (whom it calls "The brother of Jesus").

(3) Mary, the wife of Clopas is possibly the same as the mother of James and Joseph (Joses) in the synoptic gospel parallel (Matthew 13: 5; Mark 6: 3) and thus probably a near relative of the mother of Jesus.

(1) "Seeing his mother there along with the disciple whom he loved" (vv. 26 - 27).

Only John's Gospel mentions the presence of these two at the cross.

What follows is perfectly explicable in itself, an act of Jewish natural piety towards a grieving mother and a characteristic act of Jesus. But, for the gospel writer it is a "SIGN" of the spiritual motherhood of Mary, the new Eve, the mother of the faithful, (represented by John). The representative character of the Beloved Disciple becomes clear especially if seen in conjunction with other Johannine references (e.g. 13: 23). "From that hour" the disciple took her (Mary) to his own home.

In its historical sense, this expression indicates that from this moment the disciple accepted Jesus's mother as his own. In the spiritual sense, the glorification of Jesus on the cross has enacted the relationship of Mother-disciple and disciple-community that has just been signified in words. Jesus brings them into a mother-son relationship and so constitutes a community of disciples who are mother and brother to him—the community that preserved this Gospel. With this, the Johannine Jesus is able to make his final word from the cross: "It is completed!" And he hands over his Spirit to the believing community he is leaving behind (19: 30).

At the end of the 1st century AD, Mary features strongly in the text we now call the Gospel of John. Here in a positive way she is described as having (more than any other of the apostolic persons) a seminal role in facilitating the missionary ministry of Jesus and the showing forth of his divine Glory to the world. The high points in this picture of Mary are, of course, the Wedding at Cana "where (Jesus) allowed his glory to be seen" (John 2: 1-11), and the giving of the Mother to the Beloved Disciple—indicating a passing of profound spiritual authority in the "Jesus-movement" to the "beloved disciple" (John 19: 26 - 27).

All the Johannine crucifixion episodes have clear symbolic and theological significance, so that should be true of John 19: 25 - 27 as well. The "beloved disciple" is presented as

- a) the ideal or model disciple of Jesus, the object of Jesus' special love – he never deserted Jesus and seemed particularly "in tune" with him, and so after the resurrection came to believe more quickly than anyone else (John 20: 8 "the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed"; John 21: 7, "It is the Lord!"—on seeing Jesus on the beach speaking to the disciples in their boat).
- b) He is the witness *par excellence* (John 19: 35 "He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe," and cf. John 21: 24) and so guarantees the validity of the Johannine communities' understanding of Jesus as no way inferior to other church communities who claimed Peter or others of the Twelve as their founders or "foundation stones".

It would seem clear, then, that the evangelist's primary interest is not biographical, i.e. not simply to record that after Jesus died his mother went to live in the home of a favourite disciple (possibly at some time in Ephesus where piety even today revolves around "the house of Mary", venerated by Christians and Muslims (Papaya Kapulu).

So, what does it mean when Jesus says to his mother in reference to the beloved disciple, "woman, behold your son!" Initially, it is significant that the scene brings together two figures for whom John never gives us personal names, though the Johannine community surely know the personal name of the Mother of Jesus, just as they presumably know the personal name of the Beloved Disciple. Karl Donfried¹⁴ suggests:

That may mean that the significance of both figures lay in their respective roles. Nevertheless, the mother's primary role would not be her physical motherhood, since here, in a scene more benevolent than Cana, Jesus once more calls her "Woman," the title which He uses for all women. Her motherly role is rather in relation to the beloved disciple and hence not a physical one. Since it is a role she receives only as Jesus dies and goes to his Father – a role received in "the hour" of Jesus (13: 1) – it is a role that does not pertain to the earthly ministry of Jesus but to subsequent Christian history, the era of the community after Jesus' glorification. It has often been remarked that for John the elevation of Jesus on the cross is already part of his return to his Father and that Pentecost is anticipated on the cross in symbolic references to the Spirit.¹⁵ Accordingly the

¹⁴ Et al, in "The Mother of Jesus in the Gospel of John" p. 212 in *Mary in the New Testament* (1978) edited by R. E. Brown et al.

¹⁵ Possible references are in John 19: 30: "He bowed his head and handed over his spirit"; and in 19: 34: "At once there came out (from Jesus' pierced side) blood and water" (when

crucified Jesus does not die alone but leaves behind him at the foot of the cross a small community of believing disciples – the kind of community that in other New Testament works is called into being in the post-resurrectional or Pentecostal period. This may be the reason that after the scene involving Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple, John says that Jesus knew that all was now completed (*telein* in 19: 28) – the completion of his work involves the bringing into existence of the Christian community.

This Christian community is the eschatological family of disciples of Jesus, those of whom he says: "Behold, my mother and my brothers!" (Mark 3: 31- 35) cf. "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister, and mother" (Mark 3: 35). The rebuff of Jesus's mother at Cana and the careful distinction between the mother/ brothers and his disciples in John 2: 12 are in harmony with the Marcan theme; but at the foot of the cross Jesus gives his physical mother a spiritual role as mother of the disciple par excellence, and the disciple a role as her son. Thus there emerges a familial relationship in terms of discipleship. Jesus's physical mother, just as in Luke, meets the criterion of the eschatological family (Luke 8: 19-21) but his physical brothers do not (17: 1-10). They are replaced by the beloved disciple, no natural relative, but someone especially loved—and faithful!

"Behold your son... behold your mother!" John 19: 26 –27

And so Mary is publicly adopted into the eschatological family of Jesus, as Mother – not merely as "Mother in Israel" but now "Mother in Christ"—"Mother of the New Israel"—mother in the believing community born at the cross of Jesus:

cf. "But far be it for me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a NEW CREATION. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God" (St. Paul to the Galatian Church: 6: 14-16).

Jesus, even when on the cross, makes arrangements for his mother's future.¹⁶ But Barrett (see footnote) thinks it unlikely that John simply created the story in order to make this point. Perhaps we might see here the symbolism of Israel giving birth to the Christian community through discipleship and acceptance of Jesus and practical obedience to his loving command. Rudolf Bultmann suggested that "the mother of Jesus, who carries by the cross, represents Jewish Christianity that overcomes the offence of the cross".¹⁷ So

that is interpreted in the light of 7: 38 - 39: "From within him shall flow rivers of living water. Now this he said about the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive.")

¹⁶ C. K. Barrett suggests that John saw in this event a theological point—the incorporation of the ancient church of Israel (Judaism) (represented by Mary – Miriam—“The Virgin daughter of Israel”) into the new apostolic community (represented by John the disciple/Apostle).

¹⁷ *The Gospel of John* (1977) p. 673

Gentile Christianity is charged to honour the former as its mother from whom it has come—and maybe we could see (in these ‘inter-faith dialogue’ times) a call to honour that Judaism which nurtured (like Mary) the Christ, Jesus, and from which, in God's grace, grew the universal family of Jesus, the catholic church of the ages: we, who gather around Him now, as his brothers and sisters.

"From that hour the beloved disciple took her to his own" (John 19: 27)

Here then is the deep humanity of Jesus, giving, even in his acute suffering on the cross, the sheltering and care of his mother to the disciple-son. But there is another outcome—the care of the mother for the disciple-son. In later church tradition and continuing particularly into modern Orthodoxy and Catholicism we find the scene at the cross invoked as a basis for the spiritual motherhood of Mary as the mother of Christians—of the Church.

When picturing the scene of Christ on the cross with his mother beneath it, we naturally think of the sorrow of Mary for her Son's suffering. We must not forget that Christ, for his part, knew what his mother was going through. He knew the dreadful pain his wounds were causing her. His cry from the cross committing her to John was a cry from his heart to comfort and console her. John was one of his close friends and he knew that she would find help and solace in his home.

But there is more to the incident than that. Always with John's writing we must look for the spiritual symbols embodied in his words. Commentators have seen in this incident the bringing into being of the new family of God born from the cross. Without the Cross there is no Church. And since Mary gave the Redeemer to the world she gave, in a sense, the Cross also. She thus became a figure of power in the Church, having a vital part to play, with her son. So, it is not wrong to call her co-redemptrix but she did not redeem mankind. Only her Son did that. In fact she needed redemption herself. What she did do was to cooperate more closely than anybody else in her son's work of redemption, just as it is our duty as Christians as far as we are able, to further his redemptive work. The world will continue to need redemption until its end and Christ who, once and for all, offered the means of salvation through his death on the cross, now expects his followers to carry on his work of saving love.

"It was an immortal scene. The mother motionless, like a piece of sculpture carved out of the darkness. Above her the great black arms of the cross with the shackled figure nailed to it. All nature seemed to be mourning for its maker and the mother, lost in the gloom, must have felt the terrible wrench of separation from the one she loved. Who can express the bleak stillness and the inner tide of sorrow sweeping through the mother's mind and heart as the flame of life in her son diminished and gradually flickered into extinction? St. Bernard says somewhere that in the case of the other martyrs love decreases their pain, but

with Mary, the more she loved the more she suffered. Love added fire to her sufferings."

"Christ did not come into our world to banish pain, not even that of his mother. He did come to give strength to bear it. He also gave a meaning to it, to those who endure it with faith and love. Love of God and suffering are so often bound together in this life. They certainly were in the case of Christ and his mother. This is not because God is cruel and takes delight in suffering but because love is a purifying force and thus the enemy of evil. Christ has taken upon himself the burden of all humanity's sin and through his supreme act of love had conquered it. Love then was the ultimate reason for the agony of Calvary. It was a love that gave all up to the pain of separation. His cry of desolation was a proof of this and it was a cry that found its echo in his mother's heart" – and should in our hearts today, as we gather in adoration of the crucified and glorified Saviour—Son of Mary."

The Second Vatican Council ends its document on the Church with this prayer:

Let the entire body of the faithful pour forth persevering prayer to the Mother of God and Mother of men. Let them implore that she who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers may now, exalted as she is in heaven above all the saints and angels, intercede with her Son in the fellowship of all the saints. May she do so until all the people of the human family, whether they are honoured with the name of Christian or whether they still do not know their Saviour, are happily gathered together in peace and harmony into the one People of God, for the glory of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity.¹⁸

This last sentence, on the biblical theme of the People of God, eloquently sums up the goal for which the Church, the family of the disciples of Jesus, exists, works, and prays unceasingly, and implores for all peoples, Christian and non-Christian. And for each one of us, we pray in the words of the Venerable Cardinal John Henry Newman:

O my Lord and Saviour, support me in my last hour by the strong arms of thy sacraments and the fragrance of thy consolations. Let thy absolving word be said over me, and the holy oil sign and seal me, and let thy own body be my food, and thy blood my sprinkling; and let thy Mother Mary come to me, and my angel whisper peace to me, and thy glorious saints and my own dear patrons smile on me, that in and through them all I may die, as I desire to live, in thy Church, in thy faith and in thy love.

¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium* 69