

Evangelical Mary

The Rt Revd Christopher Cocksworth

Introduction

IT is a great honour to have been invited to address the Ecumenical Marian Pilgrimage and a real joy to be able to share my ‘thoughts in progress’ (and that is very much what they are) on *Evangelical Mary*. There is a special poignancy, of course, in being *here*, here in Walsingham, this place of pilgrimage, a place that in my tradition, from at least Wycliffe onwards, has been viewed as a dubious sort of place, and yet it attracts pilgrims from across the traditions, pilgrims who love the Lord of the Gospel and read his word in the Scriptures, pilgrims who are my brothers and sisters in the faith from whom I have much to learn.

This is the third time I have spoken on Mary over recent weeks. Last month I made a speech to the General Synod of the Church of England as it debated the ARCIC Report: *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*.¹ I tried to give a constructive evangelical response to that charming document.

Shortly afterwards I found myself in Dresden’s remarkable (Lutheran) Frauenkirche – Church of our Lady – taking part in the annual commemorations of the horrific bombing of that city. On the Sunday I was invited to bring a greeting from Coventry, another city that, of course, suffered horribly from ‘enemy bombing’. The Old Testament lesson of the day was Exodus 3.1-12: Moses and the burning bush. In that stunning baroque church destroyed by British and American bombers in 1945, rebuilt in the twenty-first century as the walls of division between East and West came tumbling down, I made use of a beautiful Christmas carol, composed in Utrecht in the year 1500, that Martin Luther probably knew. In what was by no means an unfamiliar late medieval motif, it makes a connection between Mary and the story of the burning bush:

As the bush stands on fire
But does not endure harm,
So shall you bear the Lord.

¹ The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (London, Morehouse, 2005)

And yet, as I surveyed this great testament to the capacity of the Church that faithfully bears the gospel to outlast the destructions that humanity inflicts upon itself, and is dedicated to the most enduring example of Christian discipleship – Mary, Our Lady – I was struck by her absence from the Frauenkirche, the Church dedicated to her memory. As far as I could see there was no symbolic reference to Mary in the whole of the building – the Church of Our Lady was without Our Lady. That is not a wholly inaccurate image of the evangelical tradition of the Church which first announced to me the grace of the gospel and in which I dare to stand.

The bible that we love speaks much of Mary, but we little. The Jesus that we follow would not have called us had it not been for Mary, but we ignore her, and sometimes we do worse. The gospel that has grasped us first grasped her, and yet we forget her testimony. The Church to which we belong named her among the faithful few on the day of Pentecost, and yet we have often sidelined her in our understanding of the Body of Christ. So, that is my interest as an evangelical Christian. In a tradition that is largely silent about Mary, how do I find a voice to express her place in the bible and in the gospel and in the Church – or, rather, how do I allow Mary’s voice, the voice so often neglected (certainly in my tradition) of a woman, a mother, a widow, probably poor and definitely oppressed, to be heard in my heart and among my brothers and sisters in the extraordinarily vibrant, and fast-growing, evangelical tradition of the faith?

I am by no means alone in this venture as far as evangelicalism over recent years is concerned. In 1964, Heiko Oberman’s seminal paper, ‘The Virgin Mary in Ecumenical Perspective’ offered a gold standard to evangelical re-appropriation of Mary. My fellow Anglican John de Satgé, wrote a penetrating study in 1979 aptly titled *Mary and the Christian Gospel*. On the other side of the water there has been considerable Marian activity, including Tim Perry’s scholarly and insightful *Mary for Evangelicals*, published in 2006 and Scot McKnight’s more popular but highly engaging *The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus* published in 2007.² I join them in seeking to find Mary’s place in the gospel according to scripture.

² Heiko Oberman, ‘The Virgin Mary in Ecumenical Perspective’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 1 (Spring, 1964); John de Satgé, *Mary and the Christian Gospel* (London, SPCK, 1979); Tim Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals* (Illinois, IVP Academic, 2006); Scot McKnight, *The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus* (London, SPCK, 2007)

The way I would like to approach matters today is to set the search for Mary within a larger theme that I have to admit has captivated me for some time – the theme of *seeing and being seen by God*. It is an overarching theme of scripture through which the whole story of salvation can be told. Briefly, the creation is the story of all things being made under the loving gaze of God who pronounces everything, including humanity, *good*. The fall is a fall from seeing and from the experience of living under that loving gaze of God, being looked on – to use a very gospel and very Marian term – with favour. Instead, the being seen by God becomes an oppression, a judgement. Eve had been promised by the serpent that her eyes would be opened and she would be like God. In fact, the result of eating the fruit of the tree of good and evil is that Adam and Eve hid themselves from the Lord. They cannot bear to be seen and they cannot bear to see God, for now seeing God will bring death – the purity of the sight of God is too much for sinful humanity to bear.

The story of redemption that follows is a story of the restoration of the seeing of God and being seen by him in love and salvation. We see hints of what is to come in Jacob who sees God and survives, but it is very hard won. Even ‘Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God’ (Exodus 3.6). To cut a long and wonderful story short, this redemptive movement by which seeing God and being seen by God is restored and fulfilled in Jesus Christ in whose face we see the glory of God and who is the exact image of God – the icon of God. The gospel stories are packed with encounters in which sight of the love of God is restored through both being seen by Jesus and seeing him truly.

One of my favourites is of the wealthy man, traditionally known as the ‘Rich Young Ruler’ in Mark 10.17-22, who runs up to Jesus and asks, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’. We know the exchange. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. The young man replies that he does so. Then Mark gives us the most exquisite moment. Jesus knows that this energetic, well-meaning – even if somewhat self-righteous – young man is still some way from the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, before saying any more to him, Jesus, Mark tells us, looks at him and loves him: ‘*Jesus, looking at him, loved him* and said, ‘You lack one thing...’. This gracious moment that Mark tells so beautifully is captured magnificently in Heinrich Hofmann’s (1824-1911), ‘Christ and the Rich Young

Ruler’³ where the intensity of Jesus’ loving gaze penetrates the religiosity of the young man and invites him into a completely new way of living, where he begins to see with the eyes of Christ, the eyes that see the suffering of the poor.

The restoration of seeing comes to its redemptive conclusion at the *parousia*, the coming of Christ at the end of time and history as we know it, for when, according to 1 John 3.2, ‘[Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is’. Of course, in the present in-between time, we do not fully see and we are, as Jesus says in John, blessed for relying on our faith. At the same time, our faith is a seeing and being seen which happens through, as Paul says, ‘the eyes of our heart’ (Ephesians 1.18). And for this seeing, the seeing of faith, we are dependent upon the testimony of those who ‘have seen with their own eyes, and looked at and touched with their own hands, concerning the word of life’ (1 John 1.1), those whose stories are told in the pages of Scripture. Among them, of course, is Mary.

In order to explain why – in particular – Mary’s seeing Jesus and being seen by him has become such an important theme for me, I need to ask your indulgence for what I shall call my ‘first evangelical excursus’.

First evangelical excursus: the vicarious humanity of Christ

One of the reasons that evangelical theology and spirituality has found it so hard to cope with a good deal of Marian theology is because of evangelical theology’s radical stress on the vicarious humanity of Christ in which our human nature is reshaped by *his* learning of obedience through suffering (Hebrews 5. 8-10), *his* saying ‘yes’ to God and ‘yes’ to the cross (Hebrews 10. 5-10), *his* ascension to heaven as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 2.10; 12.2). It is this emphasis that caused me to question, for example, the ARCIC Report on Mary when it says of Mary that hers is ‘the fullest human example of the life of grace’.⁴ Of course, the life of Jesus is *God* living out human life but that does not make Christ any less than human – the Word is made true flesh. Surely this is exactly the point that Cyril wanted secured through the *Theotokos* ascription to Mary? And is it not a principle of the Marian language promoted by Augustine, Aquinas and Newman among many others, that whatever we say of Mary is, in so doing, to say more of Christ?

³ Purchased, appropriately enough, by John D. Rockefeller, Jr and now displayed in the Riverside Church, New York.

⁴ ARCIC, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, p.65

Although I remain committed to that principle, some time ago, when I was trying to clarify my understanding of the place of Mary in the gospel, my evangelical eyes were opened by the recognition that there is one thing that Mary can do for us that even Jesus cannot do. That is to show us – and to be the first to show us – what it means *to see Jesus*, to love him, to adore him, to hear him, to place one’s faith in the grace of God that comes to us in Jesus, and to give one’s life over to this transforming grace, and then to follow Jesus as a member of his messianic family. What is more, Mary can show us what it means to be seen by Jesus – to be seen with such eyes of love that you know you will never be the same again having been seen in that way and that you will be ready to lay your life down for the one who, looking at you in this way, loves you.

So, let us now move on to consider Mary’s seeing of Jesus and being seen by him at various points in the Lord’s life. We begin with a sequence of seeings around Jesus’ conception, birth and childhood. For reasons of limitations of space, we then jump over the intriguing stories of Mary’s involvement in Jesus’ ministry to the most moving of scenes of her standing near the cross on which her son dies.

I recognize that the seeing that takes place between Mary and Jesus is a very rich seam in theology, art and literature which, though relatively new to me, will be much more familiar to many of you and that you may have mined much deeper than I. It may be interesting, nonetheless, to observe the seeing of one who is seeking to see Mary and her place in the story of salvation *evangelically*, though here I follow none other than the principle of the Angelic Doctor himself, ‘We must not attribute so much to the Mother as to detract from the honour due to her Son, who is “the Saviour of all men,” as the Apostle says’.⁵

Mary and the conception, birth and childhood of Jesus

Of course, Jesus was beyond Mary’s sight at the annunciation and subsequent conception. Nevertheless, Mary does a lot of seeing in Luke’s account, much of it the sort of mysterious seeing by faith that happens as believers hear God’s word. We do not know exactly what Mary saw when Gabriel ‘came to her’ but that

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, quoted in Edward O’Connor (ed.), *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), p.193

encounter has been fertile soil for the imagination of artist and poet alike. The gaze between Gabriel and Mary is freeze-framed by Franciabigio (1482-1525) in his carefully staged scene between angel and virgin. They look intently at each other in a moment that seems to have lasted for eternity with, as the great evangelical Anglican missionary and bishop John V. Taylor put it, ‘the dove symbol of the Holy Spirit spinning, as it were, a thread of attention between them’.⁶ Taylor goes on to quote two twentieth-century poets that also dwell on that moment and its exchange of sight, Edwin Muir and Rainer Maria Rilke.

See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,
Each reflects the other’s face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there...
But through the endless afternoon
These neither speak nor movement make,
But stare into their deepening trance
As if their gaze would never break.⁷

The angel’s entrance (you must realize)
was not what made her frightened. . .
No, not to see him enter, but to find
the youthful angel’s countenance inclined
so near to her; that when he looked, and she
looked up at him, their looks so merged in one
the world outside grew vacant, suddenly,
and all things being seen, endured and done
were crowded into them: just she and he
eye and its pasture, visions and its view,
here at the point and at this point alone:–
see, this arouses fear. Such fear both knew.⁸

Yes, there was fear, and with good reason, but the message of the angel and the experience of the virgin was fundamentally one of favour. ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you’, says Gabriel. ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, *for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant*, sings Mary. Being looked on with favour by God: this is the heart of evangelical theology and the dynamic of evangelical spirituality. This is why Mary is *evangelical Mary* – because the grace of God in all its gracious goodness and mercy

⁶ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London, SCM, 1972), pp.10-11

⁷ Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London, Faber, 1960), pp.223-4

⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Life of Mary*, tr. N. K. Cruikshank (Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1952), p.17

and pure, unbounded love has overwhelmed her and transformed her. The place where I find myself able to join Mary in her exuberant praise for the grace of God is standing under that rather extraordinary statue in the Chapter House of Ely Cathedral by David Wynne. From a distance it looks loud and gaudy, better suited to a fairground than a Cathedral. But get up close, stand beneath her and see her joy and watch her stretch out her whole body, arms reaching to the heavens and you get a feel of what it is like to be looked on with favour by the Most High and to be found by God the Saviour.

The centrality of the gracious favour of God to evangelical theology has caused me to look again at the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary with more sympathetic eyes than I have done in the past.⁹ I do not say that I have arrived at a position of affirming this doctrine and, indeed with Augustine, Aquinas and many others, I am not at all sure that it should be affirmed in any dogmatic sense given the silence of scripture and its absence from the essential kerygma of the faith. But I do feel that it is far less inimical to the gospel or contrary to evangelical principles than I thought only very recently. My thinking aloud on the subject forms my 'second evangelical excursus'.

Second evangelical excursus: Mary and the sinful will of humanity

Evangelically speaking, that is, speaking according to the grace of the gospel (and, I would say, therefore, the *text* of scripture) Mary does not find favour with God because of her moral virtue which somehow elicits reward from God, so that God chooses her to be mother of his Son because she has qualified herself to be so. No, Mary is favoured purely because of God's grace. God favours her through his mercy, through his choice of her as someone destined to be a member of humanity that is in dire need of salvation.

This is a choice that is made not during her life as a result of her goodness but in Christ (in the pre-existent Christ who was always to have *this* mother) before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1.4). This prior choice (this predestination) in the will of God is enacted in the material world at her conception. And the form of this election is that Mary should be obedient. Hence, one might say that the innate (since the Fall) incapacity for obedience was, by elective grace, lifted from

⁹ Christopher Cocksworth, *Holding Together: Gospel, Church and Spirit* (London, Canterbury Press, 2008), ch.5

Mary so that she became capable of saying, 'Let it be with me according to your word' (Luke 1.38). What has become impossible for us is made possible by the grace of God (Luke 1.37).

In this sense, the action of God in her conception (affecting the form of her election and predestination) is of more significance evangelically than the quality of her moral life from her birth, for the one is more explicitly an act of undeserved grace than the other. This is because the life of Mary necessarily involves the human element and, therefore, risks – to the evangelical mind – implications of, in some way, earning one's salvation. However, once we place the focus of the favour in the right place (the right place being the gracious election of God rather than the righteous life of Mary), then we are quite free to consider how this freedom from the incapacity of obedience was worked out in the life of Mary, how she worked out her salvation. And here it would be permissible to conjecture that she *lived in* the freedom from the incapability for obedience. This is not to imply any absence of moral and spiritual struggle, for we see exactly that struggle at the Annunciation and it continues through the gospels in each of the gospel accounts. But it is to say that it is possible to learn (as did her son) obedience, to learn to live obediently in the struggle and, at each point, to make the right decision, to say 'yes', to keep taking a step in the right direction so that one is able to say – *in and by the Spirit* – the 'yes' that one has been predestined to say and to take the step that one has been chosen to make.

Perhaps the Wesleys can help here with their openness to the possibility that through the renewal of love in the Spirit we can, for a period short or long, lose the love, though never the power of sinning.¹⁰ Does this mean that Mary was freed from the need of the salvation Christ brought? No. God's choice of her was made in Christ. It was because of God's action in Christ, an action that is always heading to its pivotal moment on the cross, that she is freed from an incapacity for obedience. The very manner of her obedience was to accept God as her Saviour and to believe that God would save the world through her son. In relation to our theme of Mary seeing Jesus it is interesting to remember that the one beatitude singled out by Christ that leads to sight of God is purity: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Matthew 5.8). Purity – we call it more formally

¹⁰ See Christopher Cocksworth, *Holy, Holy, Holy: Worshipping the Trinitarian God* (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), p.196 and footnote.

sanctification – is the work of the Holy Spirit. We know that the Holy Spirit was most powerfully and transformatively at work in Mary at the time of the conception, gestation and birth of Christ. The question that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception holds out for us is: To what extent and in what way was the Spirit at work preventively at Mary's own conception by virtue of God's prior election of Mary to be the mother of his Son, an election which, indeed, can be affirmed evangelically?

Back to the story . . .

Having taken this excursus, let us now return to the narratives. According to Matthew and Luke, all sorts of people see the child Jesus and are seen by him at his birth and in his early years: shepherds, magi, inn-keepers, towns folk of Bethlehem and, of course, Joseph, the godly, faithful and honourable adoptive father. But there was not quite anything like the gaze between Mary and her son. There never is anything that really rivals that sort of look between mother and child. The mother in whose body this new body has been formed; the mother who has risked her life to give life to this new life; the mother who now continues to sustain this life with the nourishment of milk and love.¹¹ The child who has grown in this womb; the child who has a deep physical and psychological instinct of dependence upon this woman; the child whose experience of life and love is focused on this woman. There is a sense in which every human father, despite the intensity of emotions he experiences at the birth of a child and through those first formative months and years, knows that, in the words of a children's television series of some time ago, he is 'not the mummy'. At the very least, biology determines that there is a unique vocation to motherhood and for Mary, with her memory of the angel's words, her experience of her extraordinary conception, her pondering all these things in her heart, especially so.

The look of love between mother and child, intensified through the lens of theological significance, is the overriding theme of traditional iconography of the virgin and child. They look at each other with such love. We are invited, as it were, to step into the stare, to look at Jesus with eyes of love and adoration, and in

¹¹ Whatever the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth and whatever the doctrine of Mary's virginity in and through birth may be reaching after, Scripture and the best of the Fathers of the Church are clear that this was a *real* birth.

Christina Rossetti's perfect words, 'to worship the beloved with a kiss'.¹² At the same time, by the abundant grace of the incarnate God, we are invited to see that we too are looked at with the eyes of love with which Jesus looks at Mary. Yes, there is a unique character to the love a person has for his or her mother and it would be a denial of the full reality of the incarnation to doubt that Jesus' love for his mother has something unique about it that belongs to the inviolability of that relationship. Yet, there is something inviolable about Jesus' relationship with each person, something that belongs to the unique characteristics of that particular relationship. But perhaps we can go further than this. Psychologists tell us that healthy human development involves a child reaching a measure of independence from his or her mother, not in any sense of rejection but in the sense of broadening the focused love that a child has for his or her mother so that others are included in the frame of reference and relationships with those who are 'not the mother' can be made. Perhaps, thanks to the healthy loving of Mary, there was something of this going on in Jesus' early development so that, without losing anything of the particular filial love for his mother, Jesus came to embrace others in his loving gaze, looking at us with eyes of love with an intensity that is able to focus on our particularity and the unique contours of his relationship with each of us.

There is one more moment of seeing which I would like to mention before moving from the exhilaration of the crib to Mary's agony at the cross and that is the seeing of Simeon in the Temple – the hinge between the great sweeps of the story of Jesus as it moves from Christmas and Epiphany to Passiontide and Easter. Depicted so tenderly in the soft and glorious golds of Rembrandt's (1606-69) great masterpiece, Simeon, with eyes that, though dimmed with age, are enlightened with the Holy Spirit, sees the child Jesus and in seeing him Simeon sees the salvation of the world for which he has been waiting and longing. In a profound and mysterious prophecy he shows that he has seen something of the cost of this salvation to Israel, to Jesus and to Mary: 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too' (Luke 2.34-35). Commentators are divided on its meaning. Of course they are. That is the nature of prophecies, especially ones that penetrate to the heart of the divine plan. Is it that Mary will be pierced by grief as she – in the Johannine account – stands

¹² Christina Rossetti, 'In the Bleak Mid-Winter', in *The New English Hymnal* (Norwich, Canterbury Press), p.30

by the cross of her son? Is it that Mary will share in some way in the opposition that Jesus will provoke and suffer its effects? Is it that the judgement that Jesus brings which will divide the nation of Israel will in some way pass through Mary's heart as it divides even her own household and causes her to choose between, as it were, church and family? I see no reason why it cannot be all three – personal grief, religious persecution, existential testing and no doubt much more that even now lies hidden in the heart of Mary and of her son who died for her and for all peoples. It is to this event, the suffering of the saviour, the solidarity of the Mother and the seeing that takes place between them, to which we must now turn.

Mary and the death of Jesus

With the skill of his pen John draws us into that most poignant and painful of scenes where Mary, 'standing near the cross of Jesus' together with the other women, sees her dying son and, together with the beloved disciple, is seen by him, her dying saviour who, even in the suffering of his last, agonising moments, cares for her and commissions her for the new life that is soon to emerge from these terrible events: 'When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son"' (John 19.26).

The scene that John describes so movingly has captivated other writers and painters over the Christian centuries as they too have looked in on this exchange of love between mother and son. Before the thirteenth century, however, depictions of the scene are relatively restrained. Generally, in Miri Rubin's words, 'Mary remained a figure of controlled sorrow'.¹³ This changed dramatically in the thirteenth century, culminating in the publication of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, a book that found itself condemned for imagining Mary losing control of her emotions as she witnessed the losing of her son. The same exploration of Mary's suffering was being explored on canvas. In Giotto's Crucifixion that now hangs in the Lower Church of San Francesco in Assisi, for example, we see Mary overcome with grief, fainting into the arms of her woman friends. So strong was this searching after the suffering of Mary that Pope Julius II was lobbied with a request for a feast of the *Spasimo* – Mary swooning at the foot of the cross. Interestingly, Thomas de Vio, to whom the case was referred and who opposed the idea, would

¹³ Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London, Penguin, 2009), p.243

later become Cardinal Cajetan and spend a good deal of his latter days opposing Calvin's reforms in Geneva!

In a similar but more subtle portrayal of Mary's anguish, in Ugolino's (1280?-1349) 'Crucifixion with St Francis,' Mary points to her crucified son with her right hand while she turns her head away from the cross. The mother, unable to bear the unbearable sight of the suffering of her son, directs us nonetheless to behold him dying for us all. In comparison, in a lament dating from around 1230 that was added to the late twelfth-century *Carmina Burana*, Mary's resolve will not allow her to turn her face from her son and yet, even though the device is different, the point (in every sense) is the same: Mary calls each of us to look to the cross of Christ and to know that in his death is our death.

Alas, alas, the grief is mine today and forever,
 alas, how I now look upon
 the dearest child that ever
 in this world any woman brought forth.
 Alas, my lovely child's body!
 I will look upon it forever.
 Have pity, women and men.
 Let your eyes look there.

Was there ever such torment
 and such terrible anguish?
 Now perceive the torment, agony and death,
 and the entire body red with blood.
 Let my little one live for my sake
 and let me die, his mother,
 Mary, most pitiable woman.
 What use is life and body to me?

Do we have anything analogous in this Johannine scene at the cross to 'the Holy Spirit spinning, as it were, a thread of attention between them' as observed by John V. Taylor during the Lukan Annunciation? It is traditional in western medieval art – especially in the trinitarian 'Throne of Grace' depictions of the cross – for 'the dove symbol of the Holy Spirit' to be placed between the Father and the Son, depicting the attention between them. Perhaps in the bowing of the head and giving up of his Spirit so close after the incident with his mother and beloved disciple, John is trying to tell us something. Is he giving us a hint of what we see more clearly as the reality of Christian existence unfolds, that the attention of Jesus to Mary and to the

Church that gathers around her is now to be mediated by the gift of the Spirit? Is there as suggestion that the presence of Christ given to Mary at the Annunciation by the Spirit is now given to Mary and to the whole church by the ongoing gift of the divine Spirit through Jesus and his saving death?

As we have remembered, Simeon prophesied that ‘a sword would pierce Mary’s own heart’. We have already acknowledged the mystery of this prophecy but let us dare to look at Mary’s suffering again and tentatively explore its relationship to the saving event of the cross. There are four points I would like to make.

The first is that Mary’s sufferings are unique. She suffers the grief that only the mother of Jesus can experience.

Second, Mary’s sufferings are real but not saving. They are distinct from the saving action of the cross. Mary is the recipient of their effect rather than a participant in their making. In this sense, she is indicative of the relationship that the whole Church has with the cross.

Third, there is another sense in which Mary’s suffering is indicative of the Church and the Church’s relationship to the cross. Her suffering speaks of the suffering of the Church which bears Christ in the world. Although the suffering of the Church is not an atoning suffering, it is, nonetheless, a suffering of solidarity. J.B. Lightfoot put it admirably in his classic commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians when he says of Colossians 1.24 that it is:

a simple matter of fact that the afflictions of every saint and martyr do supplement the afflictions of Christ. The Church is built up by repeated acts of self-denial in successive individuals and successive generations. They continue the work which Christ began. They bear their part in the sufferings of Christ. (2 Corinthians 1.7; Philippians 3.10).¹⁴

In this sense, Mary is situated where every follower of Christ must be situated – always looking to the cross, to the salvation won, to the cost of standing with the Saviour in his suffering. It is a cost that many women have been ready to pay.

¹⁴ J.B. Lightfoot, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London, MacMillan, 1890), p.164

There is a remarkable chapel in the grounds of what was once a Nazi headquarters in Cologne. In this place that for a short and terrible time was taken over for the purposes of violence, there is a chapel built in the style of a gas chamber dedicated to the German nun, Edith Stein, who paid the ultimate price for standing near the cross of Christ. She was exterminated for refusing to remain silent in face of the suffering of Christ's ancient people. The scene on the reredos behind the altar of the women around the cross, Edith Stein among them, is an almost unbearable sight of the cost of discipleship and the sufferings of the Church.

Fourth – and here I hesitate to tread on this most holy of ground – might Mary's suffering in some mysterious way also be a reflection of the suffering of the Father, who suffers the death of his Son? There is a most remarkable painting by the sixteenth century Lutheran artist, Cranach the Younger (1515-1586,) that hangs in one of Dresden's magnificent art galleries. It depicts the Father holding the body of the dead, crucified Son. One cannot fail to be reminded of Michaelangelo's Pietà, that most moving of Marian art, that stands in St Peter's Basilica in Rome, where the sorrowful mother holds the heavy weight of her executed son. Of course, there is an absolute difference of being between the eternal, divine Father of the only begotten Son and the human mother of Jesus, but might the grief of this poor, lowly woman be an echo of a chord that our human ears can hear of the cost to divine love that is borne in the heart of God?

Finally: Mary looking at us

There is so much more to say on this rich theme of seeing and being seen by God with the help of the loving gaze between Jesus and Mary. But time is not on our side and so I must bring this thinking aloud with you to a conclusion. I do so with a question that I know I need to think more about. It is a question not so much about Mary looking at Jesus but of Mary looking at us. Might there be an evangelical case for Mary's gaze on us? Dare we even ask, as the Salve Regina puts it, for Mary to 'turn those two merciful eyes on us'?

On one level, the question requires another lecture that faces up to a different set of claims about Mary's ongoing ministry in the body of Christ and then analyses them according to the gospel. But on another level – the level that has been travelled during this lecture – we can certainly say that if Mary is looking at us then she is doing so always to invite us to look at – and to look to – her son,

always deflecting, pointing, leading us to Jesus Christ, even as she does in the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham through the gentle gesture of her right hand. Like the Apostle Philip she calls out from the pages of scripture and from the communion of saints with her uniquely loving and privileged relationship to the Lord, saying: 'come and see!' (John 1.46).