

Mary and Healing

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To discuss the role of Mary in the healing ministry of the Church we have to think about the healing ministry and why it is needed. We also have to consider the type of role Mary plays in Salvation history

We have to acknowledge that we live in an imperfect world; a world which cries out for healing; physical, mental, spiritual, social and political healing. It has been like this for as long as humans can remember; and one of the great questions which people of faith have tried to wrestle with is why is this the case. The universe by its very nature is temporal, changing and according to cosmologists decaying towards an eventual cold dead nothingness. Something very different from the vibrant life and love of God.

The creation stories in Genesis while they do not claim to be actual history do contain important points. The good Creator, fashioned a good creation; but something went awry and sin entered the created order. The story of the Fall in the 3rd chapter of Genesis is an attempt to explain the observed reality of sin and death in the world, but also contains an important prophecy that the seed of Adam – and note that the word for “seed” is singular; the seed of Adam will crush the head of the serpent – the serpent who symbolically is the source of evil.

That seed of Adam, Christians believe, is Christ. Christ who came to earth and won a great victory over sin and death at Calvary.

In preparation for the redemption of the world God gave the Law through Moses.

The Law provided for purifications, ritual washings and the like. Water is symbolic of life – we are all about 80-90% water. Pure running water was and still is precious, and healthy – in a great contrast to stagnant unclean mires. Wash in clean water and you really are clean. Food prepared with clean water is good and likely to be wholesome.

- It was through a Flood that God symbolically cleansed the world in the time of Noah.
- It was as Rebecca was drawing water from the well that made known as the future wife of Isaac.
- Moses, the great redeemer in the Hebrew Scriptures was saved from being killed by the waters of the Nile.
- Moses led the escaping Hebrews to safety across the Red Sea.
- Joshua led the Hebrew tribes across the river Jordan to their promised home.
- The Easter garden symbolically contains running water.

The Law also prescribed sacrifices for sin, sacrifices which were offered to God. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews points out these sacrifices were but a temporary and imperfect remedy for sin and were in fact a type or image of the one perfect sacrifice for sin which could be offered to the Father. A sacrifice which could bring healing to the world.

In the one perfect sacrifice God offered to God the life both of God and of man, a perfect man, the only perfect man, Jesus who was both human and divine. And it is here that we see the start of the role of Mary, the new Eve. Much has been made in hymns and songs of the pun between the name Eva and Ave (hail) as in Ave Maria.

Mary freely consented to co-operate with God in his saving work, his healing of the created order. She took a huge risk. God himself took a huge risk.

Have any of you seen the film the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (or read the book)? The death and resurrection of Aslam the Lion is a picture – almost a parable - of the death of Jesus (although CS Lewis denied it). When challenged that his dying was not a risk because the “deep magic” had prophesied the outcome, Aslam replied “yes, but it had never been tested”. The risk was real. The risk to Mary was real. The risk to God was real.

In all the icons of Mary, she is pictured as pointing away from herself and towards Jesus, Jesus who is the Salvation, the healing of the world. Mary’s role is to point us to Christ.

Through Mary we are helped to approach and encounter Christ. Mary’s role is and always has been subject to and supportive of her Son. At the Wedding at Cana in Galilee she tells the servants to do as Jesus tells them and points them to Him to help. Mary is thus instrumental in providing us with the first of the signs of Christ in St John’s gospel – the turning of the water into wine; water which was good was turned in to something even better – as the hymn goes “wine for our joy”.

Mary remained faithful to Jesus when all others deserted him. She remained with him at the foot of the Cross. Mary was present in the upper room with the apostles on the day of Pentecost when the infant church was given the gift of the Spirit.

From then onwards she disappears from Scripture apart from the passage in the Apocalypse where she is pictured robed and crowned.

When Jesus was on earth he was challenged by the Sadducees about resurrection. Jesus told them that the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob was the God, not of the dead but of the living.

The resurrection of Jesus vividly illustrated this and the passage in the letter of Peter indicates that between his crucifixion and resurrection Jesus went to preach the victory to the souls in prison – note these were not dead but living souls.

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Church can teach that the Church in Heaven, the Church in Paradise and the Church on Earth are one. This doctrine is often called the Communion of the Saints. We do not pray to the saints but because they are alive we can ask them to pray to God for us and with us.

As the first and the greatest of the saints the Blessed Mother is well placed to present our prayers to her Son and to pray for us. As a living person she continues to have a concern for the Church her Son founded and a church who she was symbolically made mother of when our Lord committed St John to her care from the cross.

Healing is one of the most neglected ministries of the Church – there has especially in Protestant countries been a suspicion of magic and a mistrust of the supernatural, but Christ came to save, to make whole, to heal. This ministry is well depicted in the letter of James.

So often healing is associated with holy wells, springs of living water bubbling up to which pilgrims have flocked over the centuries. These wells are often associated with saints. In our own deanery we have a holy well associated with St Oswald.

The ministry of healing has for a long time been a particular feature of this parish – with the work of our Guild of St Raphael. Their work of praying for the sick reflects the Gospel practice of bringing the sick to Christ for healing; you only have to think about Simon Peter's mother-in-law, the paralysed man and the lepers. People were brought to Christ for healing, the sick were pointed to Christ in whom there is true healing and redemption.

The shrine of our Lady at Walsingham has what is probably the most famous holy well in England. It is said that the vision of our Lady pointed Richeldis de Faverches, a Saxon noble-woman who had a vision of the Virgin, to the place to build a shrine.

Many shrines of Our Lady have Holy Wells and the waters from these wells have long been held to have healing properties. There is an analogy here with the waters of baptism.

Baptism is, of course, a once and for all Sacrament, mystically washing away sins and making us whole by uniting us with Christ. You can only be baptised once, but the mystical healing powers of the Holy Wells are in

some ways icons of this sacramental mystery; through this holy water we are cleansed from our sins and our relationship with Christ the great healer is restored.

The shrine of Our Lady at Lourdes is perhaps the most famous centre for Christian healing in the Western world. Like Walsingham it is associated with a holy well, a spring which is said to have sprung from the very site where the Virgin appeared. The shrine at Fatima and many others similarly have Holy Wells.

Healing and absolution, the mystical washing away of sins are all about restoring our relationship with God in Christ. These Holy Wells at sites for shrines of the Blessed Virgin are yet further examples of how she points people to Christ the great healer.

But if all God's creation is to take part in his resurrection then the message about the healing love of Christ must be spread throughout the world in this and in every generation. The Blessed Virgin is the patron of the Mothers' Union and their worldwide work with families and underprivileged communities shows the love of Christ at work in creation, and like a living icon of Mary points people to Christ.

And of course once you have been brought to Christ and his work of healing has begun in your heart and soul then in order for the healing to continue you need to be properly nourished.

Food is important for someone convalescing after an illness, and food is important for our Christian pilgrimage through life. At the Altar, Christ nourishes us with his Body, the true bread of heaven and with his precious blood, the royal wine of heaven.

Here is why Society of Mary events normally include the Mass and Benediction, for it is through his sacramental presence in the host, that Holy Sacrifice, that we meet him most fully and tangibly in our lives today.

In summary I think that the role of the Blessed Virgin in the ministry of healing is to point people to Christ, to present prayer for people to Christ, in a sense to introduce them to Christ the great healer.

So pray for us, O Holy Mother of God, that WE may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.