

## A Tale of Two Marys

Long ago, two women were born into this sin-filled and fallen world. Both were named "Mary," and both entered the Kingdom of God, but their roads to the heavenly kingdom were radically different.

One, born as an answer to her parents' prayers, was raised in a faithful Jewish household until the age of three, when she was taken to the Temple in Jerusalem and given to God. She grew up in the Holy of Holies, and never deviated from her devotion to the God whom she loved and served. Although bearing and struggling against the same sin nature as all of us, she never once debased herself to fulfill her animal appetites. Her love for God blazed in her white-hot, and because of that love she found the disorder of the passions revolting.

As a young teen, she was given to Joseph, a God-fearing widower with children, to be protected in her virginity and chastity. Joseph, an old man, gave Mary a home and supported her. His love for her was strong, but pure and godly. She was beautiful beyond telling, and gracious and good, but never once did he give in to temptation to have his way with her. His strength was her earthly anchor as she grew into a young woman.

In her mid-teens, the angel Gabriel, who had brought her the words of God and sustained her during her life in the Temple, came to her to bring her a new word of God, the Word of God incarnate. His annunciation to her of the saving love of God to take flesh in her was welcomed by her: "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word." And the Holy Spirit descended on her: the Word of God became flesh in her womb, the eternal becoming in time, the uncircumscribable being circumscribed in her womb, the transcendent God becoming immanent, the unknowable God being known to mankind, the divine life taking human life from her.

Without suffering the sin-borne pain of childbirth, Mary bore the eternal God as a newborn babe, suckled the God who feeds all flesh, gazing into the eyes of the One on whom the angels dare not gaze, providing intimate earthly infant necessities to the one who provides for all things. And yet, in her humility, sharing nothing of what she knew: that she was the mother of God. She held these things in her heart and pondered them before the God whom she held in her arms.

Raising him to manhood, then releasing him to his earthly ministry of bringing the *evangelion*, the good news of the coming of the Kingdom of God to a sin-filled and fallen world. Walking with him, supporting him, encouraging him, then watching him suffer and die; and on the third day seeing him risen from his tomb, then ascend to his Father. Living with the Beloved Disciple as with a son, praying for all, venerated by the Church, returning to Jerusalem to die and be received into the arms of her beloved only-begotten son, enthroned on his right hand and faithfully supporting his heavenly ministry as she had his earthly one, living with the Church as with her children, praying for all, venerated by the Church. Hers is the divine life lived in a fallen world. She is our example.

The other Mary was born in Egypt, the place of slavery to sin, and ran away from home in her early teens to live a life of unrestrained sexual immorality. She delighted in every form of debauchery and perversion. She went out of her way to ensnare the virtuous and use them for her sin-filled pleasure. She lived this way for seventeen years, "a fire of public debauch [with] an insatiable desire and an irrepressible passion for lying in filth," as she related. She traveled to Jerusalem to continue her life of riotous sensuality, seducing and corrupting all in her path.

It was there that she came face to face with the other Mary. The passions collided with purity, and repentance flowered. On the day of the Exaltation of the Cross, Mary of the passions sought to join the throng venerating the precious and life-giving cross, seeking to enter the Church where the Cross was held up the people to see and offer relative worship.

In the mercy of God, the Mary of the passions found herself unable to enter the church where the precious wood of the Cross was being venerated. Try as she might, she was prevented from crossing the threshold by an invisible force. She found herself standing on the porch of the Church, exhausted from exertion, and "the word of salvation gently touched the eyes of my heart," as she related, "and revealed to me that it was my unclean life which barred the entrance to me." She wept. She lifted her eyes, and her eyes met the eyes of the mother of God; she began the long process of repentance, changing her mind and changing her ways. She asked for the intercession of the Mary of purity,

vowing to do whatever she was commanded after worshipping the Holy Cross. Her nascent repentance unbarred the door of the Church to her. She was allowed to enter the Church, venerate the Cross, and kiss the very earth that was the floor of the Church.

Leaving the Church, she stood before the mother of God and heard these words: "If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest." Mary fulfilled her vow. Leaving Jerusalem and crossing the Jordan River, she lived in the desert in repentance for forty-seven arduous years. Deep-rooted passions require drastic countermeasures. Her repentance was radical and complete. She gave no consideration to the demands of her flesh, refusing to pander to her passions. She sought only to lay a foundation of new-found purity and on that foundation build herself into a temple for the Holy Spirit.

God accepted the repentance of the passionate one, as she uprooted the passions and passionately pursued the divine life. Her profound prayers inscribed on her soul the image of God, and so filled her with the divine, ineffable and uncreate Light that she walked on the waters of the Jordan and was lifted in the air as she interceded for the world. From darkness she was translated into God's marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9) and became a creature of light. This Mary is also our example.

God's grace does not extend only to the pure and perfect. God extends his energy – his love – to all, at every time and in every place, in every circumstance. You do not need to earn God's love, you do not need to perfect yourself before he will give himself to you. He is calling you, as he called Mary on the porch of the Church. He didn't wait for her to repent. His grace barred the door of the Church to her not out of condemnation, but out of mercy; his word of salvation filled her heart *before* she repented and *led to* her repentance.

Wherever you find yourself, right now, God's word of salvation is entering your heart. Will we answer the call to repent, to change our way of life, to radically and completely repent, to stop pandering to the passions, to give our flesh – that part of us that is in rebellion against God – no respite and no mercy? Will we build ourselves into a temple of the Holy Spirit? Will we venerate the precious and life-giving Cross of Christ, and follow the footsteps of both Marys into the Kingdom of heaven?

Each of them, like each of us, was free to choose. Will we choose life or death, the Kingdom of Heaven or the kingdom of darkness? There is no middle way, no *tertium quid*, no escaping this choice. This day, this instant, choose which kingdom you will enter and in which kingdom you will remain. If we do not daily, moment by moment, choose the Kingdom of God, we remain in the kingdom of darkness. The way of life and the way of death lie before us. Is the *evangelion* – the coming of the Kingdom of God – good news?