

Q. What do we know about Mary, the Mother of Jesus? Why are we looking at Holy Week from her perspective?

Mary of Nazareth is a powerful, and at times controversial, figure in our Christian tradition. Her image is a source of prayer and strength, a connection with God, and yet that image shifts and changes to take on the cultural characteristics of those who look to her. Across the globe, men and women pray for her intercession, asking that they pray with them as they seek God's healing and guidance, and countless have reported mystical experiences as result – both of that prayer working, as well as actual visions of Mary speaking to people, sometimes groups of people (particularly children). She is named *Theotokos*, Bearer of God – most exalted among women. She draws millions of people to shrines like Fatima and Lourdes each year, sustaining religious tourism worth billions of dollars. She has inspired the creation of many great works of art and architecture (Michelangelo's "pieta," Notre Dame cathedral). Yet, the Protestant arm of Christianity has pushed back against some of these titles and prayers, feeling that they border on idolatry, raising Mary above her human status to suggest more god-like qualities. Interestingly, while she has been a point of division between Catholic and Protestant belief, she is a unifying force between the Christian and Muslim religions. Muslims, too, consider her to be holy above all women, and her name "Maryam" appears more often in the Koran than "Mary" does in the Bible!

For all of this closeness and controversy, however, Mary speaks only four times in the Bible, and there are few certainties we know of her life. Scholars guess that she would have been between the ages of 12 and 14 when betrothed to Joseph, the carpenter and became pregnant with Jesus. Joseph, like Mary, was thankfully in tune with angels, and because of an angelic message, stayed with Mary and raised the baby who was born as his own. There are legends which suggest that Joseph and Mary and Jesus travelled through Jesus' childhood, even as far as England. By the time the adult Jesus comes on the scene, however, Joseph seems to have long since died. Mary at times is shown struggling with understanding the controversial ministry of Jesus, even attempting to quiet him down and bring him back home. However, like the other disciples who had their times of misunderstanding and mistrusting Jesus, her faithfulness wins out. John's Gospel tells us that Mary stayed by her son up until his death on the cross. From the cross, Jesus entrusts his mother into the care of his "beloved disciple" (who we assume is John), and legend again tells us that, in fact, they lived together on the island of Patmos furthering the Gospel up until their deaths. The Catholic church, in fact, believes that Mary, because of her faithfulness, was spared human death, and at the end of her life was carried directly to God in heaven. Other Scriptural sources affirm that Mary was an integral part of the early Jesus movement, and therefore one of the apostles of the early church.

Questions, traditions and legends aside, there are some core characteristics which have made Mary so beloved and which have provided consistent strength to the faithful. It is to these core characteristics that we will look as we journey through Holy Week this year at St. George's – Palm Sunday (March 20th) to Easter Sunday (March 27th), and that most holy journey with Jesus through the final week of his life, to the cross, and to Resurrection. We know that Mary was strong and faithful. She made mistakes. She suffered deeply. She loved greatly. Her story

allows us many points of entry, her vulnerability and humanity allow us to relate to her, to feel a sense of resonance with her experience and with her faithful choices out of the challenges she faces and the mistakes she sometimes makes. We believe, in fact we experience, that in allowing Jesus' story to come close to our human story, we become more able to participate in his ministry, his courage in the face of the cross, his rising to new life.