

Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1. 39-55)

Sarah Bachelard

This is the first stanza of a poem called 'The Mansion of Mary' by Nicola Slee.

There's a secret door in the belly of Mary,
hidden to most but open to all.
There is no handle.
You enter by seeking and weeping and prayer:
or by sheer serendipity.
Once inside, the space is vast and endlessly expanding.
Like the Tardis or those Russian dolls that fit inside each other,
the spaces go inwards, infinitely unfolding.
And there is not only one room, but many:¹

Nicola Slee is an English poet and theologian who says that for her 'of all the women in the Bible, Mary has been ... the most ambivalent, the most alien and yet, at some level, the most alluring. I've taken a long time to come to her – or for her to come to me'.²

Perhaps many of us could say something similar – though no doubt for different reasons. If your background is Protestant, then Mary has probably not figured largely in your Christian imagination. If Roman Catholic, then she's probably there – but in what guise? From a feminist perspective both traditions of response to Mary have problematic features. The patriarchy of Protestant tradition writes her out of the salvation story altogether – ruling out any hint of the feminine in the divine. The patriarchy of the Roman Catholic tradition portrays Mary all too often in pastel colours, literally a plaster saint, voiceless and submissive, the measure by

¹ Nicola Slee, 'The Mansion of Mary' in *The Book of Mary* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), p.1.

² Slee, *The Book of Mary*, p.vii.

which all other women are pre-destined to fail. For what real woman could live as both virgin and mother? In turn, feminist and liberation theologians imagine their own Mary, insisting on her ordinary womanliness and peasant origins, her relationships with other strong women and her prophetic anthem announcing God's favour to the poor. In fact, in Slee's collection of poems about Mary is an ode 'In praise of Mary's hairy armpits'!! But maybe these too are just more projections. Once you start to imagine Mary, as Slee says,

'the space is vast and endlessly expanding.

...

And there is not only one room, but many:³

Who is she really? How might we to relate to her in the imagination of *our* faith, our hearts?

Traditionally, Mary is an icon of obedience: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'. Significantly, an 'icon', unlike a projection is something you see *through*, something that enables encounter with the reality to which it points. And for me it's the obedience of Mary that remains the real source of her inspiration in my life. What I've discovered, though, is that obedience to God is a much fuller, richer, more dangerous notion than I used to think. It's not easy, doormat-like submission, not just being a 'good girl'. It's a profoundly courageous choice, a choice that leads you on the adventure of your life, takes everything you have. Its magnitude is reflected in the magnitude of what becomes possible because of it. And that's what Mary's Magnificat rejoices in.

To begin with, Mary claims that her soul 'magnifies' the Lord. We usually hear this merely as a synonym for praise: Mary is praising God and so making God 'look bigger'. But, as Rowan Williams has pointed out, 'the words used in the ancient languages are more robust' – 'magnify' 'really means making something greater *in fact*, not just making it look greater'. How can we make God bigger than God already

³ Nicola Slee, 'The Mansion of Mary'.

is? Well, 'when we praise someone ... we make them bigger in the sense of giving them more room: we step back, we put our preoccupations and goals and plans aside so as to let the reality of something else live in us for that moment, find room in us'. In Mary's case, not only has she let go self-preoccupation long enough to create more room for God to live in her – she's actually handed herself over, body and soul, so that God's life might be more fully realised in the world. 'Because of her yes to God, there is ... a new release of God's presence and power There is more room for God, because the usual obstacles to God's work, in self-preoccupation and fear and resentment, have been overcome in Mary's unswerving willingness to absorb the vision God has given'.⁴

This unswerving willingness, this radical obedience renders Mary one of those whose faith is pivotal in the history of salvation – on a par with the patriarchs of old. In the New Testament, Jesus is often designated as the new Adam, the new Moses, or the new David, but he is never called the new Abraham. Theologian Raniero Cantalamessa has suggested that the reason Jesus is not associated with Abraham is very simple – Mary is our Abraham. 'Just as Abraham did not resist God's call to leave his father's country to go to a new land, so Mary did not resist God's declaration that she would bear a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. Abraham's faith foreshadows Mary's "Here am I"'.⁵ And just as Abraham's faith stands at the source of the people of Israel, so Mary's faith stands at the source of the new creation inaugurated in Christ. Which is why, just as for Abraham, Mary is promised that through her all people will be blessed.

So, Mary's obedience is an extraordinarily powerful thing. It makes room for God – it's the condition of God's life being more fully realised in our world. And it's a decisive turning point in the history of salvation – through her 'yes', because of her

⁴ Rowan Williams, Sermon on the occasion of the National Pilgrimage to The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham Monday 31st May 2004, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1639/national-pilgrimage-to-the-shrine-of-our-lady-of-walsingham#sthash.GgelZm6N.i2UUIdpX.dpuf> [accessed 15 August 2015].

⁵ Cited in Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), pp.51-52.

costly faith, our faith is become possible. And yet – it's a paradoxical kind of power – the power of free consent, the power of undergoing, the power of self-emptying, rather than the power of domination, control or violence. Mary's power foreshadows the paradoxical nature of the power of the crucified Christ, just as Mary's obedience foreshadows his.

And more and more, as I understand it, this is the heart of the life of faith. It's about making room for God's life to live in ours, willing (though not without dread and fear) to say 'yes' to God in the face of all that says that's a bad idea – since it may cost us security, social respectability, religious conformity and more besides.

But what does this really mean for us? Sometimes, like Mary, we seem to be confronted with a clear question of obedience, a clear request from God, an annunciation of sorts. But mostly it's not like that. We'd like at least to contemplate handing ourselves over in radical obedience, but life seems pretty much to be carrying on as usual. There may be choices to make – about a job or friendship, about a place to live or a course of study ... but nothing too dramatic. So what does the obedience of Mary look like in the course of ordinary life?

I think it begins small, with seemingly unimportant acts of consent. It begins as we make space for prayer, for attending with God, committing to a daily practice of some kind. Gradually, we may become aware of being asked to deepen our availability, our receptivity. As our antenna get more tuned to God's wave-length, maybe we receive a sense to turn off the television for an evening, to resist passing on a juicy titbit of gossip, not to indulge a bad mood. Obedience too is a practice, and it begins with small things – small, seemingly insignificant choices to make room for God, or not, in the midst of ordinary life. Yet it's as we are faithful in the small things, that our listening, our sensitivity for God deepens. And then we are entrusted with bigger things. Nicola Slee writes: There's a secret door in the belly of Mary, hidden to most but open to all. There is no handle. You enter by seeking and weeping and prayer: or by sheer serendipity.

Our vocation, like Mary's is to show forth, to realise more of God in the world. The way is one of obedience, and Mary can light our way – not to a pastel piety, but to the courage that leads you on the adventure of your life.