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The Magnitude of Obedience (Luke 1. 39-55)

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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', she writes, '- 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 the Protestant tradition has tended to write her out of the salvation story altogether – ruling out any hint of the feminine in the divine. The patriarchy of the Roman Catholic tradition has taken Mary seriously, yet portrayed her all too often in pastel tones, literally a plaster saint, voiceless and submissive, the measure by which all other women are pre-destined to fail. For what real woman could live as both virgin and mother?

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.

In turn, feminist and liberation theologians imagine their own Mary, insisting on her ordinary womanliness and peasant origins. They note her relationship with other strong women like Elizabeth and her prophetic anthem announcing God's favour to the poor. 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 her, as Slee says,

'the space is vast and endlessly expanding.

...

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

So who is she really? How might we relate to Mary in the imagination of *our* hearts?

Traditionally, Mary is an icon of obedience – and I think it's significant that an icon, unlike a projection, is something you see through. It's supposed to point you to a deeper reality, enable your encounter with and transformation by its truth. So what is the truth of Mary's 'obedience'? What is its significance for us?

When the angel Gabriel appears to her in the annunciation, telling her that she is to conceive and bear the child of God, Mary responds: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'. And for me, what Mary has enabled is the discovery that obedience to God is a much fuller, richer, more dangerous matter than I used to think. It's not easy, doormat-like submission, not just being a 'good girl'. It's a profoundly courageous act; a choice to respond to what seems utterly impossible or beyond you and that involves everything you are. And in our tradition, the magnitude of Mary's act of obedience is reflected in the magnitude of what becomes possible for God and for humanity through her 'yes'.

In the passage we just heard, Mary claims that her soul 'magnifies' the Lord. We usually hear this merely as a synonym for praise. But, Rowan Williams points out that 'the words used in ancient languages are more robust' – 'magnify' 'really means making something greater *in fact*', not just saying that it's great or making it look greater. 'My soul magnifies the Lord'. But how can Mary magnify God, make God

³ Nicola Slee, 'The Mansion of Mary'.

greater than God already is? Well, says Williams, ‘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 stepped back enough to create 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’, says Williams, ‘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

Mary thus becomes someone whose faith is pivotal in the story of the world’s healing, in history of salvation. And here’s a tantalising observation. In the New Testament, Jesus is often compared with, even identified with, the heroes of Israel’s faith – he’s designated the new Adam, the new Moses, the new David. But he’s never called the new Abraham. Theologian Raniero Cantalamessa has suggested that the reason Jesus is not associated with Abraham is very simple: Mary is the new 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 obedience, his ‘Here am I’, foreshadows Mary’s ‘Here am I’.⁵ 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 community 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 – is a condition of God’s presence being more fully realised in our world. It’s a

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.

decisive turning point in the history of salvation – through her ‘yes’ our ‘yes’ is become possible. And this is a ‘yes’ that God invites of all people.

But what does this really mean? How does Mary’s example, her radical obedience to God, connect with our situation? She was confronted (it seems) with a clear request, a clear choice to say ‘yes’ or not. Perhaps sometimes we too experience an annunciation of sorts. But mostly it’s not like that. There are plenty of choices to make – about jobs, friendships, about where to live or what to give ourselves to ... but nothing that seems of that magnitude. What does God’s call to radical obedience look like in the course of ordinary life?

My sense is that it begins with seemingly unimportant moments of consent. As perhaps, we find ourselves making space for prayer, for attending with God and to the stirrings or intuitions or unsettlement of our own hearts. Gradually, we may become aware of a draw to deepen our availability, our receptivity. As our antennae get more tuned to God’s wave-length, to the ‘still, small voice’, maybe we have 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 is a practice, and it begins with small things – seemingly insignificant choices to make room, or not, for God and for the promptings of our inner being in the midst of ordinary life. Yet as we are faithful in these small things, then our listening, our sensitivity deepens. And then we may be 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 become available such that God’s life might be more fully realised in the world. The way is the way of obedience which means, as Laurence Freeman has said, not doing what you’re told but becoming the word you hear. And Mary, icon of obedience, lights our way – not to a pastel piety, but to a ‘yes’ of such magnitude that it enables the incarnation of love.