

Anne: Could you briefly introduce yourself?

Dorothy: I'm Dorothy Lee, I'm an Anglican priest in the Church in Australia, the Anglican Church in Australia, and I'm professor of New Testament. My speciality is in the Gospel of John, although I'm interested in all the Gospels and in all the New Testament, I have a particular interest in women's issues and spirituality, as well.

Anne: Can you give me a brief overview of what we know about the Virgin Mary from the Gospels?

Dorothy: There's not a lot, but what we have, I think, is quite significant. So going from the Gospels, she's, of course, in the birth stories inevitably of both Matthew and Luke, and that's where we first encountered her, in those two Gospels, as the mother of Jesus. In both those gospels we have the notion of the virginal conception, that is to say, that Mary conceived Jesus without a human father, and that therefore she is the sole guarantor of Jesus' humanity. That's the first thing I think we learn about her.

But alongside that, particularly in Luke's gospel, we learn that she is a woman of considerable faith. I say woman, but in fact it's most likely she's by our standards a girl, a teenager, because women came to adulthood very early, and were married very early, so we're assuming she's around anything between fourteen and fifteen years old. That would be the normal age. We can't be sure of that, but that, at least to us, emphasizes the strength and extraordinary nature of her faith. So Luke makes that quite clear about her.

We have various incidents in the life of Jesus, including as a precocious adolescent. We have various incidents where she struggles to understand what's happening, and perhaps there are moments of misunderstanding on her part. But then in John's gospel, we find her at the foot of the cross. She's not explicitly named in the synoptics - although there is a Mary there, we're not clear who she is - but she's mentioned then in the Gospel of John as being at the foot of the cross, and one of two main disciples who are there at the foot of the cross,

And then finally, the other explicit reference to her is in Luke, again, Luke at Pentecost, where she's among the Twelve Apostles, reconstituted, and the Holy Women. So, she's not mentioned very often, but I think in very significant locations.

I think the story of the annunciation, when the angel Gabriel comes to her, is really the story of her call. It's her call as a prophet, and she is a prophet, as is of course, her relative Elizabeth. She produces one of the most beautiful canticles in the Gospel of Luke, which really sets up the radical revolutionary dynamic of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. And so we would expect her to be at Pentecost as well. Her association with the Spirit in Luke is very strong, and in John's gospel. I think she's most prominent in Luke and John.

In John's gospel there's no birth story. We just met her first at Cana, where she initiates Jesus' Ministry, you might say. She nurtures the faith and the disciples, because she says those key words: do whatever He tells you. And then we find her again at the end of Jesus' Ministry, at the foot of the cross, as I said before. So we have her in two really important locations in John, the first sign of Jesus' Ministry, and at the foot of the cross. In Luke she's there at the birth, obviously, with her faith, and again at Pentecost, the birth of the church.

Anne: I think you touched on this a little bit already, but in your writing you talk about Mary as being a priestly figure, and just now you referred to her as a prophet. I would love it if you could expand on that a little bit.

Dorothy: I'm not trying to claim that Mary's a priest. She's not, and women weren't in the Old Testament, but she's priestly in the sense that she gives birth, she bears Christ, so the Council of Ephesus declared her to be the God Bearer, which is translated as Mother of God, which is maybe not the best translation into English. But God Bearer is exactly what the Greek says. So she bears God in her body, and not just as a physical act, but as a spiritual act, as well.

Her "yes" in Luke, at the Annunciation, is her "yes" to God dwelling within her, And so in that sense she does what the role of a priest does, or indeed of the priesthood of all believers, either way, and that is to bear God within ourselves. She is given that role, and therefore she is a model for the church, and she stands for the Church in that sense that we bear God within us, and birth God, as it were, to others. And that is a priestly role. It's the role of a priest or an ordained person in terms of sacraments, but it's more broadly the role of the whole church, as a priesthood of all believers.

Anne: I would love it if you could speak a bit about how the cult of the Virgin Mary, and especially the idea of perpetual virginity, has been used as a tool of the patriarchy.

Dorothy: I think Mary has been used as a tool of patriarchy, and it saddens me to say that, because here we have the first woman in the New Testament, who has first place alongside, I might say, Mary Magdalene, but both of those women are first. And yet both of them, in different ways, their wings have been cut off. You know, they can't fly. And it's done very differently in both cases.

In the Virgin Mary, it's the notion of a perpetual virginity. It's kind of an ambiguous picture. On the one hand, the sort of Catholic orthodox picture of Mary introduces a feminine element, which, I think, a very strict Calvinistic Protestantism has lacked. It's been very austere and masculine. So you could say it's more feminine, in inverted commas.

But at the same time, it's also - I almost said emasculated Mary, but that's not the right image. It's because she's not sexually active. She's not a threat to men. A sexually active Mary, who has a good relationship with her husband, good enough to produce a whole heap of kids, and I have no doubt in my mind that they are full siblings of Jesus, and I would argue that against those who claim the perpetual virginity of Mary.

I think she's safe. She's a safe female. She's no threat, and therefore it's taking the whole feminine world, the world of women, and putting it into a little box. And therefore she's used to keep women at a distance. So even though she's a priestly figure, women are not allowed to be priests in the Catholic tradition, even though the model they have is Mary, and in fact, some traditions even speak about Mary as the help of priests, the one that priests particularly go to. Okay, yes, but it's only male priests who are allowed to go to her.

So by putting her in this box, by depriving her of a sexual part of her sexual identity - not that I'm saying that everybody has to be sexually active, to have sexual identity, but she's a married woman. You know, she's not celibate. And therefore to have her as married and non sexually active, I think actually reduces her impact, makes her a safe figure, and it's a safe box to put women in, lock the door and throw away the key. And you've dealt with that, but in fact you haven't. So that's inadvertently why I think she becomes a tool of patriarchy

Anne: And what's the flip side? How has Mary Magdalene, as you say, had her wings clipped?

Dorothy: In the Western church, Mary Magdalene is associated with the sinful woman of Luke 7, who we think is a prostitute. She's certainly unclean anyway. Though Luke's not interested in whether it's sex that's her particular issue, or something else. Luke's only interested in her as a sinner, But we assume she's a prostitute, we're very quick to make that assumption, and thereafter she's associated with Mary Magdalene.

So now we have the picture of Mary Magdalene, who's cured of seven demons, Luke tells us - in other words, she's got what we would call some sort of mental illness. She perhaps suffers from depression, anxiety, whatever - these are our terms. She's healed of that, and it's assumed that it's sexual. And then by Gregory the Great, in the Western church, you get Mary Magdalene, a prostitute. And, once again, while we've de-sexed Mary, we've over-sexualized Mary Magdalene, and she is no longer the Apostle of the Apostles, and the first to witness to the Risen Christ, So that's how her wings have been clipped.

Anne: It's kind of wild when you read about Pope Gregory, just how much influence he had over how her story is interpreted. Like when you dive deep into that you're like, oh, he just made stuff up,

Dorothy: I think he just got sick of all the Marys, you know, and thought, oh, we're just going to make them two Marys. You know, there's Mary of Bethany, who's Mary Magdalene, and then there's Mary, the mother of Jesus, and that solves all our problems.

But that, too, becomes the tool of patriarchy as well, because she's repenting for her sins. There are some depictions of her in art that shows her always repenting, in a permanent state of penitence for her sins. *She's* regarded as the sinner, not those who use the sex workers, but the prostitute who may be driven to it by economic means or whatever. So there's a whole lot of problems around that mythological picture of Mary Magdalene, which has the amazing effect of depriving us of the Apostle of the Apostles.

Anne: And I know this question wasn't on my list, but I am curious, having read some of your writing - I was wondering if you could just speak to Jesus' treatment of women, and then later how that gets down played by the church.

Dorothy: Yeah, I think Jesus is quite remarkable in the way that he deals with women, Dorothy Sayers once said, in a couple of essays, she wrote that Jesus neither patronizes women, nor does he put them on a pedestal. So he treats them as human and as equals. And he includes women among his disciples. We have an image of the disciples - if you say to most people in the pew, you know, what's your image of Jesus going to Jerusalem, It's

Jesus walking ahead with twelve men strung out behind him. And possibly you might throw in Mary Magdalene as one of the movies does.

But, in fact, Luke tells us that Jesus sent out seventy, so that means that there's a big crowd probably coming and going. But Luke is also explicit about the fact that there's an inner group of men, the Twelve, and there's an inner group of women, Mary Magdalene, Susanna, Joanna, he named several of them and implies that there are many others. It doesn't imply, actually - he says many others. Many other women who follow Jesus from Galilee.

I think that as the kind of patriarchal structure of the Roman world takes over, and the church starts to sort of pull in from some of its more radical edges, that is one aspect that gets toned down. I don't think it does in Paul - Paul actually has an extraordinary way relating to women. If you read Romans sixteen, he acknowledges Phoebe, who takes the letter to the Romans to Rome, and who is described as a deacon, and who most likely explains it, you know, to them. I imagine she would read it out to them. And then we have Priscilla - Prisca, as Paul calls her - who's a fellow missionary with Paul and teacher. And then we have Junia the apostle, Junia, who is quite clearly a female apostle. So I think that the New Testament itself, for the most part, is very affirming. Yes, it's a male world, and there's recognition of that, there's awareness of that. But really, when you look at it, it's an extraordinary picture that we get of women's participation in the Jesus movement, and in discipleship, and even leadership in the church.

Anne: In your writing, you spoke a bit about one of the dangers of this desexed Virgin Mary, that it turns sex, something that is regarded as a divine gift in Scripture, into something inherently sinful and problematic. I would love it if you could speak a bit.

Dorothy: I think what happens in the early Church is that there comes a kind of suspicion of sexuality, and in the Western church it leads to celibacy eventually being enforced for priesthood, because sexuality is seen as something that's dangerous and threatening, and that goes alongside women being seen as threatening as well.

So I think what happens is that - I mean, sexuality in the Old Testament is absolutely a gift of God. Doesn't mean it doesn't have its dangers, or can't be abused, it can and does. But if you look at, read something like the Song of the Song of Solomon, it's erotic. And even the image of marriage - I know that there might be problems around that, but the marriage between God and Israel is talking about sexual intimacy and love. And I think Scripture is entirely positive that this is one of God's wonderful - slightly crazy and difficult to handle, it's the wild card, you know, the Joker in the pack - but it's an absolutely wonderful gift. And so much so that the final banquet of the end time is described as marriage.

So this extraordinary intimacy which is of the body, it's not just a spiritual, it's a bodily thing - and I think that that goes along with scriptures, emphasis on the body and bodily resurrection, and on the future resurrection of the dead, which is a bodily resurrection. It's about intimacy, essentially, and a delight and pleasure. All of those things which Christianity is essentially about. I remember saying to a couple of friends of mine, "You know, Christianity is basically about pleasure." And they said, "What?" And I said, "Well, it is. I can quote verses if you like, but read Psalm sixteen. We believe that the end result of everything is to - I'm going to quote here from the Westminster Shorter catechism - the chief end of man

is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. So enjoyment, pleasure, intimacy, they are absolutely intrinsic to Christianity and the great gifts that God has given us, And I think when we're much more nervous about sexuality than God is.

Anne: In the scripture, it says that Jesus is both fully human and fully God, and that he's born of a human mother. And then so when we encounter this trope of perpetual virginity and sexlessness. In what ways does that dehumanize Mary?

Dorothy: I think we dehumanize Mary by depriving her, as a married woman, of her sexuality. And I think we have problems with Jesus as well, because we fail to take account of the fact that His humanity - and it's a full humanity, His full humanity, the word became flesh, you know, human flesh, and dwelt among us, as John's Gospel says - His full humanity is dependent entirely on a woman.

And therefore Jesus' humanity is already woman-identified, which I think is part of the reason that Jesus is so open to women, because you could imagine that Mary has a huge impact on him. I mean, Joseph disappears from the story, so we assume he's died at some point, and you can imagine that his mother is the one who educates him, who is really close to him, and struggles to understand you.

But I think that Jesus is fully human, but that humanity is dependent on a woman. I think that's something really, really important that we haven't grasped the full implications of in the church. And some people, some people question the virginal conception, and say, "Well, you know, is that fully human?" Because none of us has that experience. And that's true. I mean, Jesus doesn't experience everything we experience. He doesn't marry, for example, he doesn't experience the whole of a human life. He experiences aspects of it, enough. But that woman-identified humanity - I think we have not actually come to terms with sufficiently.

Anne: I would love it if you would just give a brief description of feminist theology and what it means to you.

Dorothy: Feminist theology, to me, means, first and foremost, baptism. It's not about women's rights, though I think there's a big place to talk about women's rights within it, as there are about the rights of disabled people, or people who are poor, or whatever. So rights talk has its appropriate place, but not here, at least not in the first place.

What we want to talk about in the first place is baptism. And underlying baptism is the notion that we are made in the image of God - male and female, God created them, as Genesis 1, the first creation account, makes quite clear. Women and men are equally made in God's image. In Baptism, we are re-made in the image of Christ. We enter into Christ's identity. We take on a new identity, That is in fact our true identity, and that confirms being made in the image of God. And Baptism is where feminist theology begins and it begins in Galatians III, with Paul saying in Christ - and he's talking about baptism - there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, you are all one in Christ, Jesus.

It's that new Christic identity that we take on in Christ, and that is what ensures our mutuality with men in discipleship and in Christian ministry. I remember, years ago, in arguments about the ordination of women, somebody saying, "If you won't ordain them, then don't

baptize them.” And that's absolutely right, because the basis for ministry, whether lay or ordained, is baptism, because we take on the identity of Christ and we are transformed equally.

So we're equal - I mean, that's good and bad, you know. We're also equal in sin. I mean, some of us like to get together and say how superior women are to men, which, as a view, I probably secretly still think - having two daughters, two granddaughters, who also think that - but that's not our official position. We are equal in sin, we're equally responsible for sin, for the evil in the world. And we're also equally the objects, the subjects of God's redemptive love. And that's where it begins. That's what feminine theology is to me, and everything flows from that, I think, from that essential insight about baptism.

Anne: And is there anything you think I've missed or that you wish I had asked, or anything like that?

Dorothy: I don't think - I can't think of anything else. I just had one thought that I hadn't really explored before, but - well, a couple of things. One is, that I've probably already said, and that is the notion of the two Marys. What would happen if we started our understanding of church with not the twelve Apostles - who are wonderful, don't get me wrong, you know, God love them - but let's just put them to a side for once, just for a little bit. And let's start with the two Marys, the Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. What difference would it be if we started church on the basis of their life and witness, their mission, their proclamation of who Jesus is. And that's the question I'm still asking. What would it mean if we started there? And that seems to me a perfectly biblical thing to do. It's amazing all the things you can do that are biblical, much wider than our very narrow view of scripture.

So that's one thing that I think we need to start exploring a little bit more. And that might have implications for lots of things. It might mean a recovery of the Holy Spirit - you know, the forgotten person of the Trinity - it may mean a recovery of the spirit. It may mean a lot of things that, following, not just the two Marys, but some of the Mothers of the Church, as well.