

Sunday 24 March, 2019 – 6pm

A sermon preached by the Director of Music of St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne at Evensong on the Third Sunday in Lent, the Vigil of the Annunciation to the BVM

Readings: Proverbs 8: 1-21; Psalm 123; Matthew 1: 18-23

[Take lectionary]

We've reached that bizarre time of the year when, thanks to daylight saving, it's not yet dark at seven o'clock in the evening, but it remains dark until well after seven o'clock in the morning. Even so, at tonight's Evensong we celebrate the Vigil of the Feast of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Like all our festivals, tomorrow's festival begins at sundown today – and if you don't believe me, you can consult our lectionary! While I've got them captive (is any of you choir members awake and paying attention?!), I can show you this little blue book. This is the lectionary – this is the little book I'm always referring to when you ask me 'Why are we singing this psalm?' This book is the reason. This book tells us which parts of the Bible we read and sing at services throughout the year. (Well, weekday Evensong is a little different, but you can ask me about that another time.)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The compilers of the lectionary give us three readings for Evensong, one of which, the Psalm, was sung by the choir. The first reading actually read was from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, and specifically the book of Proverbs. In our Book of Common Prayer service, the psalm is said or sung before the first reading, but in principle the psalm's role in this lectionary is to connect the other reading from the Old Testament (or the first reading) to the New Testament reading, the so-called second reading.

Examining the first reading, the book of Proverbs is part of the Old Testament Wisdom literature, along with the books of Ecclesiastes and Job: Proverbs shows us that the good prosper, the evil are punished, and the world is ordered by a wise and just God. Ecclesiastes questions this, proposing that people don't always necessarily get what they deserve – life is unpredictable. And Job shows us that even when bad things happen to good people, if they remain faithful to God, all will work out for them in the end.

Our reading from Proverbs this evening is an ode sung by the heavenly being Wisdom – in Hebrew, Chockmah. Wisdom is an attribute of God – her character or

personification is always spoken of in the female gender in the Scriptures. I'm not a Hebrew scholar, but I've read that the word Chockmah is not just about wisdom, but is also attributed to skilled artisans and builders, and therefore has connotations of construction or handiwork – even revelation and incarnation. One can see why Wisdom's attributes are often compared with those of Mary, the Mother of 'God with us'.

Wisdom cries out: be prudent; acquire intelligence; choose me over silver or gold. Part of choosing me is the fear of the Lord – start with that. I will be faithful to you if you are faithful to me. All that you desire will be yours, just fear the Lord, choose Wisdom, and hate evil and all its ways.

Fair enough. All sounds pretty sensible to me. Now, let us consider our psalm in this light. It's on page 3 of the order of service.

If we consider Wisdom to be an attribute of our understanding of God's character, Wisdom is part of that heavenly being to whom the psalmist gazes: 'Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens.' Much of the language of the rest of the psalm mirrors the Magnificat, as sung by the choir before the Wisdom lesson: the word 'behold'; the 'maiden' or 'handmaiden' figure; the concept of 'mercy'; the 'proud' and 'wealthy' and how they are often not Godly. I believe the intention here is to draw a connection between the Psalm, the Magnificat, and the character Wisdom, as featured in the reading from Proverbs. And therefore a connection between Wisdom and the Blessed Virgin Mary herself.

Our New Testament reading is a familiar passage from Matthew's Gospel detailing the Annunciation, the faith of Joseph, the future redemptive act of the Messiah, and the naming narrative: 'you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' It's not really about Mary, but about the Annunciation, its impact on Joseph, and his interaction with Wisdom, first 'to dismiss her [– that is, Mary –] quietly', then, in possession of the Angel's message, the verse following our portion tonight states that, '[w]hen Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife'.

So: what – is – it – about – Mary?! Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers are taught a firm devotion to Our Lady from an early age. My children enjoy the great benefits of attending a Catholic Primary School, and my boy Theodore – who's in prep, 5 years old – was taught the Hail Mary in his first few weeks of school. Many Anglicans also use this prayer, but some find it theologically problematic. If you are suspicious of a devotion to Mary, I'd ask you to question why. Historically, reformers referred to Marian devotion as 'Popish' and it got tarred with that particular brush along with idolatry, iconoclasy, and superstition. The cultural divides between

Anglicans and Roman Catholics should now be relegated to history, if there is any danger that they have not already.

[Here I offered some historical information about the Pulpit Controversy of the 1880s when Bishop Moorhouse had sought to break down denominationalism in St Paul's parish Church on this site whilst this great Cathedral was being built. I tried to point out that denominationalism has been going on far too long and should be finally relegated.]

The Hail Mary is fine – scriptural in fact – down to the bit about 'Mother of God'. Well, what's wrong with that? Some would argue that she's only the mother of the second person of the Trinity, The Eternal Word, Emmanuel 'God with us', but that makes her no less mother of God because she's not the mother of the Father and/or the Holy Spirit. I mean if there were ever an opportunity to reimagine Trinitarian Theology, the Father through the Holy Spirit makes flesh the Eternal Word through Mary – without Mary's agency and assent, the Eternal Word would never have become the Son – God would never have shared our earthly mortal life in all its joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains, nor taken away our sin.

How should Anglicans feel about 'pray for us now, and in the hour of our death'? Strictly speaking – well, scripturally speaking – Anglicans have no tradition of the saints praying for us to God, only Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. This is made clear in chapter eight of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, part of that wonderful pastoral treatise about life in the Spirit. You'll remember that it concludes: 'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

This is why some Anglicans consider the prayers of the saints unnecessary, because we have the intercession of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and if all else fails, 'the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' can never leave us. Emmanuel. God with us.

So, if you pray the Hail Mary, good for you. And even if we don't believe that Mary prays for us, well, there's no harm in asking. Perhaps you might connect Mary with the Chockmah – the Wisdom of God – or perhaps not. Given what the Church teaches, so long as you believe nothing at odds with it, you'll be fine. And if you want a good dose of Marian devotion, be here on Sunday the 7th of April from about 4pm as the Walk with Mary arrives in procession from St Patrick's, with incense, candles, and statues – which will be respectfully left in the Narthex. It will conclude here with Choral Evensong at 5pm. That's 5pm for Choral Evensong, not 6pm, on Sunday 7 April.

'Mary, when the time had come,
as a virgin bore her son;
in her body was the place
where God set his throne of grace.'

Let us pray.

Faithful God, as we approach the penitence and discipline of the remembrance of your Son's Passion and Crucifixion, grant us a share in Mary's joys and sorrows. Allow our bodies to be the place where Jesus rests through the Mysteries of the Divine Sacrament of the Eucharist, and let our grief give way to the joy of the Resurrection. For you reign in the highest heaven, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.