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Desiring Mary

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Advent and Lent are seasons of desire, seasons of anticipation.

Advent is the anticipation of life. Advent is about desiring the arrival of the Messiah, then and now and, one day, once-for-all. Advent anticipates the telling of the human story by the Word made flesh, who tells it anew to heal our failed attempt.¹ Jesus' tells it as the peaceful way of pure self-giving towards God and all creation, in which he shines in the darkness of distorted desire.

Lent is the anticipation of death. Lent prepares us for the death of the crucified God and death's failure to put an end to God's life.

Advent is about learning to desire the gift of the incarnate God. Lent is learning to desire the gift of the crucified and resurrected God.

Hence in many churches the penitential colour purple is used for both seasons, weaving the life and death and resurrection of the Gentle One into a single tapestry. This God walked among us, sharing fully in the human experience, both life and death, participating in our world without reserve.

In these passion-charged seasons of fasting, prayer and expectation our desires are taken, broken, blessed, and given back to God, a sweeping Eucharistic movement from hostility to hospitality – from life crippled in on itself to life centred quietly in the generosity of God.

Our wayward desires are exposed in Advent, their clandestine stranglehold on our choices, our imaginations, and our subconscious laid bare as we await God's inbreaking. Spiritual disciplines we adopt during these weeks can have a profound effect on our lives, releasing a heightened sensitivity to the Spirit's work in all things, be it farming or face-painting, philosophy or friendship.

This release is not only *towards* God in Christ but also *from* the world and its ceaseless projection of illusions, broadcast into every nook and cranny of modern life, from billboards to mobile phones. Our entanglement in the mirages of self-absorption is unravelled as de-forming fantasies of power and pride are re-formed into Trinitarian patterns of humility and self-emptying.

Such reformation, such realignment of desire, however, needs a *mediator*, for desires, like language and cultural skills and much behaviour, are learned not from textbooks but by *imitation*.² In René

¹ David Bentley Hart expresses it this way: "Because the true story of the world has been lost in the seemingly endless epic of sin, Christ must retell – in the entire motion and content of his life ... – the tale from the beginning." (*The Beauty of the Infinite*, Eerdmans, 2004, p. 325).

² As proposed in the cognitive sciences by mirror neurons and in anthropology by René Girard. This sermon is indebted to Girard's theory of desire as mediated (!) to me primarily by the works of the theologian James Alison and the conversations of my theologian colleagues Scott Cowdell, Sarah Bachelard, Heather Thomson and Neil Millar. A grateful thanks to all is offered.

Girard's classic example of imitation, two children are in a room, one child desiring what the other has. But because only one object exists, *rivalry* sets in, swiftly followed by violence. Just ask Abel!

The Scriptures are awash with maldirected desire – Adam and Eve's desire to overtake God, Jonah's desire for release from responsibility. But alongside these rivalrous, violence-prone desires are redemptive ones – “As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs for you” says the Psalmist (42:1); “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” says Jesus of Jerusalem (Mat 23:37).

And pre-eminent among all expressions of desire, save that shared between the Son and the Father, is the astounding example of Mary.

Sermon-wrapped words fail miserably to convey the irruption of delight and longing that is Mary's – “my soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.” Words of poetry alone brood where the soul sojourns.

Mary desires God for she trusts God's desire of her: “God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant,... the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name.” Her desire is not the possessing of God, nor the consumption of “spiritual truths” gleaned from the latest self-help program. Rather, it emerges from humility, lowliness, from service to God.

In our *kenosis* we empty ourselves to God as God emptied Godself for us.³ In this letting go of self and status, new desires emerge in us, sometimes for the first time, sometimes as familiar but faint memories.

Mary's desires are not a private passion shared between her and God: “God has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things.” The hungry yearn for food, but also for political and social liberation; for Israel life meant socio-economic flourishing and not simply biological longevity.⁴ The poor, the hungry, the entrapped – all of us – yearn too for the living water (John 4), for the bread of life (John 6), who nourishes us in body and soul, who feeds us in word and sacrament.

God's desire of Mary is no fly-by-night phenomenon. “God's mercy,” says Mary, “is for those who fear him from generation to generation...He has helped his servant Israel... according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever.” Mary's trust in God's kindness is well-founded, grounded in the massive *prioriness* of God's gift in creation, in Israel, in the recently-departed angel's promise.⁵ Mary names God's Yes to humanity, as it reverberates through Israel's stories and songs.

Mary too is no one-night spiritual wonder. She is a theological hard-hitter when it comes to naming distorted desire: “God has scattered *the proud* in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down *the powerful* from their thrones... He has sent *the rich* away empty.” The proud, the powerful, and the rich are archetypes of rivalry, cheer leaders for the spectacle of hatred and revenge we

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol 1, 1982, p. 425, “it is, rather, the participation in a history whose content is God's *kenosis* to the world and the world's to God.”

⁴ Jon Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life*, Yale UP, 2006, p. 112.

⁵ See James Alison, *On Being Liked*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003.

participating in, unable to extract ourselves. Mary names our No to God, as it too reverberates through Israel's songs and stories.

So here we are in Advent. On the journey to a manger we find ourselves unexpectedly serenaded in song by Mary, she who desires God. She is not the mass-produced Mary of religious trinkets, but the dangerous Mary, the passionate Mary, who held in her flesh the enfleshed Logos. This is the Mary who felt deep in her being the consuming, enveloping love only a mother can feel – and towards whom? None other than the One who Was, and Is, and Is to Come!

In her role as the God-bearer and God-nurturer, Mary is deservedly regarded as unique in human history. Thus, as Mary herself anticipated, all generations will call her *blessed* (1:48) – blessed in her desire for Jesus and her devotion to Jesus. Blessed as a mediator of desire second to none. In our attending prayerfully to *this* story, our yearnings can imitate hers, our desires can fall into step with her rhythms. And, thankfully, unlike the toy shared between children, the object of her desire turns out to be no mere object but Subject, *the* Subject prior to us and *for* us. We can share in her desire without the spectre of rivalry.

But for all her beauty and compelling witness, this scriptural image of desiring Mary, as church history shows, has distorted manifestations. For some, Mary has become in and of herself an object of desire. This happens when we exchange imitating the desires of another to desiring the imitator.

But I have not encountered Mary this way. Rather, in the Anglicanism of my youth, Mary was at best just a lucky woman and at worse an object of revulsion. Mary was even at times a scapegoat we ideologically ostracised in petty disputes, supposedly to demarcate our identity *against* some other supposedly less-enlightened group – “We’re not like *them!*”

But tragically this led to wholesale neglect of Mary. Thus our desires and imaginations, in desperate need of Christ-directed nurturing, were robbed of one of Scripture's most precious gifts. (Let alone the tragedy of our being caught up in the rejection of those others too. Lord have mercy.)

Perhaps, in a Girardian analysis, rejection of Mary stems from the repression of desire that Mary evokes but is denied by one's denominational traditions – we indeed want what she wanted but have been told that hers is too dangerous a place for genuine contemplation to occur. *The risk of desiring Mary is not worth the reward of desiring what Mary's desires*, so the story goes.

But yet our Advent readings are not so risk-averse. Desiring Mary is evoked among us this day, so how shall we respond with the Spirit's guidance?

Let us ponder in our hearts God's word to us, as Mary pondered in her heart God's word to her.

Let us allow Mary's Christ-centred passion to shape ours in this Advent season.

Let us have the generous and liberating vision that Mary had of this God soon to be world-born.

Let us attend to Desiring Mary, mediator of desire *par excellence*.

Let us too be God-bearers, desiring to bring forth the saving Word of God in our words and deeds.

Finally, with all due respect let us dissent from ecclesial desire-police, and confess honestly that our ambivalence towards desiring Mary only further discloses – despite our charade of religious rationality and doctrinal decorum – that our darkened desires must be buried in Christ and raised to new life by the Spirit.⁶ Amen.

⁶ Balthasar, *ibid.*, p. 425, “For our senses, together with images and thoughts, must die with Christ and descend to the underworld in order then to rise unto the Father in an unspeakable manner which is both sensory and supersensory.”