

ON GROWING OUR FAITH: AND RESISTING EXTREMISM¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney on the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, known as Candlemas, Candlemas, 2 February 2025

In 1843, the Feast we celebrate today was called, following the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. That is because the event itself had two functions. The first was to purify the mother in accordance with Jewish ritual law and the second was to present the new child, particularly if a boy, to the Lord.

In the afternoon of the Feast of the Purification in 1843, a Thursday, the Reverend John Henry Newman, who was, at that time, the Vicar of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford, mounted his pulpit to preach what was known as a 'University Sermon'. These sermons were required to be preached on certain occasions in the university year and were attended by the Vice-Chancellor and other university dignitaries. It is somewhat of a misnomer to call them sermons. The address that Newman delivered that day was more than 11,500 words long and must have taken about 90 minutes to deliver. By contrast, this sermon of mine is much shorter and, even so, quite long enough on this Sunday morning. Newman, a leader of the Tractarian Movement, and whose influence we still see and hear in this church today, famously converted to Roman Catholicism, ended his life as a cardinal, and is now a saint. This sermon was his last major Anglican utterance before his conversion. In September of 1843 Newman resigned from St Mary's and, in October 1845, became a Roman Catholic.

The subject of Newman's sermon cum lecture was 'The theory of developments in religious doctrine'. It is widely regarded as the most important of his Anglican writings and, just before his conversion, appeared developed into a full-size book called *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Newman took as his text the Virgin Mary's reaction to the song of the angels at the birth of Jesus in Luke's gospel, the words just before this morning's gospel: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart".² Newman notes that Mary did not simply remember the words; she thought about them, she pondered them; she turned them over in her mind and thus developed them into some meaning for herself.

In Newman's opinion, it was the duty of all believers to ponder on what God has revealed and to come to conclusions about that revelation. He acknowledged that the deepest experiences and conclusions of Christians had very humble origins. Here is some of what he said:

3. Thus St. Mary is our pattern of Faith, both in the reception and in the study of Divine Truth. She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to possess, she uses it; not enough to assent, she develops it; not enough to submit the Reason, she reasons upon it; not indeed reasoning first, and believing afterwards, with Zacharias, yet first believing without reasoning, next from love and reverence, reasoning after believing. And thus she symbolizes to us, not only the faith of the unlearned, but of the doctors of the Church also, who have to investigate, and weigh, and define, as well as to profess the Gospel; ...³

Of course, Newman was right. His views were endorsed by English writer, Margaret Hebblewhite in the Christmas 2024 issue of *The Tablet*, when she called Mary the Church's

¹ Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24; Luke 22-40.

² Luke 2:19.

³ John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843*, Notre Dame IA, University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, pp. 313 & 317. The text can also be found at: <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/oxford/sermon15.html>.

first theologian. What we take to be the doctrines and beliefs of Christianity are the result of the application of reason to our religious experience. We will soon say the Nicene Creed, this year 1,700 years old, which is a development and organisation of what the early church experienced. Not only that, it is subject to various interpretations today. I do not know exactly how our predecessors in the faith have taken the words of the creed, but I do know that I view the world very differently from those who lived in the 4th, 16th and 18th centuries. Thus, as I say the creed, I locate it in my world, not theirs. I expect that you do the same. So, what Newman said about the Virgin Mary can also be said of us. Whether we do it deliberately and consciously, as we might expect of theologians, or whether we do it more informally, every Christian person participates in the development of doctrine.

That leads us to what you must now begin to see is a significant problem: how can doctrine properly go in all the many ways that such a process will take it? Surely, some of us must get some things wrong. Who is to be the authority? Who checks up on our random thoughts? Much of Newman's sermon, and particularly of his subsequent book, are taken up in addressing this problem. His solution ultimately led him to the Roman Catholic Church with its definitive papal authority. What he recognised was the contrast between a location of authority in a specific place and the way in which Protestantism has constantly split into small sectarian groups, often based on different interpretations of the Bible. For him the choice was between a single Pope and every man his own pope. But he also recognised the work of the Holy Spirit or, as he put it, God's Providence. Although our reflections might go in all directions, only some of those directions endure. Most of them fall away. What remains does so, he argued, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

One of the things that Newman stimulated was the revival in the Anglican Church of ancient festivals and ceremonies. Thus, we have revived the Feast of Candlemas for today's celebration. The central traditional element of Candlemas is a procession with lighted candles. This feature of the festival seems to have been originated by St Sergius, pope at the end of the seventh century, who was also responsible for inserting the *Agnus Dei* into the mass. St Alcuin of York, in a homily on this feast in 790 AD describes the whole population of the city as carrying lights.⁴

The candles have their origin in the words of Simeon that Jesus is to be a 'light to lighten the Gentiles'.⁵ That Jesus was to lighten the Gentiles did not at first appear relevant to the early church. They were much more interested in incorporating Gentiles into Judaism. You will be aware of the battle that Paul fought to remove the requirement for circumcision and other Jewish rituals in the early church. We might say that this decision, a decision to fulfil the central message of Candlemas, was one of the first ways in which the church illustrated Newman's argument about the development of doctrine. Something was discarded, for good reason, and a new way of seeing people in relation to God was constructed. Thus, whatever the problems, the development of doctrine is essential. We in this church today are the descendants of the early Gentile Christians. We might say then that, if there had been no development of doctrine, we would not be here.

The idea of the development of doctrine is still significant for us. One of the major threats in the modern world is the rise of religious extremism, which is the freezing of doctrine and the promotion of certainty. Certainty is a major problem for us. If you have seen the movie,

⁴ See John Henry Blunt, *The Annotated Book of Common Prayer*, Rivingtons, London, 1872, p. 131.

[Candlemas - Wikipedia](#)

⁵ Luke 2:32.

Conclave, which I recommend, you will remember Cardinal Lawrence, the character played by Ralph Fiennes.

Prior to being locked into the chapel for deliberations, the cardinals celebrated Mass. It is here Lawrence delivers a homily “from the heart,” saying: “There is one sin which I have come to fear above all else ... certainty.” He goes on to describe how “certainty is the great enemy of unity ... the deadly enemy of tolerance.”

Lawrence provides further wisdom to his fellow clerics: “Our faith is a living thing precisely because it walks hand in hand with doubt. If there was only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery and therefore no need for faith.”⁶

We are faced with many varieties of certainty on both sides of contemporary movements: political, economic, environmental and religious. Religions with written scriptures are particularly susceptible because the book can always be made the standard.

Political conditions help extremisms because their chief human function is to provide certainty in a time of uncertainty. In that sense extremism is a form of idolatry, the elevation of text to divine status, supplanting the living God with the static written word.⁷ We see that appearing in today’s United States.

We need to be clear that, without the development of doctrine, we would still have Christians supporting slavery; we would not have women priests, just to identify two specific outcomes. These new conclusions were arrived at only by serious and deliberate theological reflection and not only by acknowledged experts.

Although it may be difficult, we need to understand that the light we celebrate today is not such a light that illuminates everything by its blinding clarity. What we face here is the paradox of light as darkness. Rowan Williams suggests that God enlightens us not so much by making everything plain and simple, but by disturbing our preconceptions and upsetting our satisfactions.⁸

It is for this reason that the development of doctrine is so important. Only as we engage with, and are disturbed by God can we truly find our way in the uncertainties of the world.

So today, on this Feast of Candlemas, grasp also the opportunity and responsibility as a Christian to participate in the development of doctrine by allowing the light of Christ to illuminate and disturb you and to save you from the danger of frozen thought.

They came, as called, according to the Law.
Though they were poor and had to keep things simple,
They moved in grace, in quietness, in awe,
For God was coming with them to His temple.
Amidst the outer court’s commercial bustle
They’d waited hours, enduring shouts and shoves,
Buyers and sellers, sensing one more hustle,
Had made a killing on the two young doves.
They come at last with us to Candlemas

⁶ [Certainty is the enemy of unity and tolerance - The Fulcrum](#)

⁷ See Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, pp. 191 ff. See also Keith Ward, *What the Bible Really Teaches: a Challenge for Fundamentalists*, London, SPCK, 2004.

⁸ Rowan Williams, ‘A Ray of Darkness’, in *A Ray of Darkness*, Boston, Cowley, 1995, p. 103.

And keep the day the prophecies came true.
We glimpse with them, amidst our busyness,
The peace that Simeon and Anna knew.
For Candlemas still keeps His kindled light,
Against the dark our Saviour's face is bright.⁹

⁹ [A Sonnet for Candlemas | Malcolm Guite](#)

FEATURES / Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Biblical scholarship is throwing new light on Mary – or Mariam – and revealing a woman who reasons, questions and turns over in her mind the mysteries of faith / By MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE

The Church's first theologian?

“IF PROTESTANTS ARE going to talk about Mary,” writes Presbyterian New Testament professor Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “we must begin in a Protestant-like way. That is to say, we must begin with scripture.”

And what does she find, as she breaks the mould of centuries of Protestant neglect, and writes *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*? One interesting point is on the “pondering” in Luke, after the shepherds visit the manger and report on the angels’ message: “Surely if the evangelists explained how John the Baptist or Peter pondered over Jesus, the Church would long ago have dubbed these as

moments of theological reflection. Because the reflecting subject is a woman, her pondering has been cast in sentimental and trivialising terms.”

Protestant professor Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore takes a similar line. “Through her pondering, Mary becomes one of the first theologians of the Christian tradition,” she says. She identifies as characteristics of “pondering”, firstly, that it is prolonged and often inconclusive; secondly (and this is explicit in the Lucan texts) that it is located in the heart and not only in the mind; and thirdly, that it implies “realities that go beyond our understanding”. Mariam (my preferred name for Jesus’ mother, following the original language of the New Testament) is pondering on what Catholics would call a “mystery” of faith – something of unplumbable depth.

Another Presbyterian who saw this pondering as theological reflection was Professor Patrick D. Miller, who even called Mariam “The Church’s First Theologian” in the title of his article (*Theology*, October 1999). But in Catholic circles today, we do not hear the term “theologian” applied to Mariam. Often, post-Vatican II, she is called “the first disciple”, and also with increasing frequency “prophet”, because of the Magnificat. (Mariam was also the name of the first woman prophet of the Greek Old Testament.) But “theologian” sounds to many people an exaggerated claim.

Let us look more closely at the texts. After the shepherds recounted the vision of the angels proclaiming the birth of “a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord”, Mariam “treasured all these words, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:11, 19). The word for “pondering”, *συμβάλλουσα* (*symballousa*) literally means “throwing together”.

A similar phrase is used 12 years later, when Jesus is found in the Temple: Mariam “treasured all these words in her heart” (Luke 2:49-51). The Greek verb used here for “treasured” is found in the Greek Old Testament for people reflecting on God’s revelations – Jacob on Joseph’s dream (Genesis 37:11) and Daniel on his visions (Daniel 7:28). So Methodist Professor Joel B. Green, linking the two Testaments, concludes that Mariam treasures the words because she “must engage herself in hermeneutical reflection to grasp their meaning”.



Giorgione, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, c1505-1510

As Roberts Gaventa suggests, it is more common to hear Mariam’s “pondering in her heart” interpreted as a modest silence, a feminine lack of articulacy. But this is probably wrong. After all, Mariam was the articulate parent when Jesus was found in the Temple. And if we leap a gospel, John’s Cana story shows her actively intervening in events.

THOSE I HAVE quoted so far are Protestants, but until relatively recently Protestant theologians typically regarded her (at least during the ministry) as an unbeliever – leading to Jesus’ seemingly dismissive comment, “Who is my mother?” (Matthew 12:48). It surprised me that even Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, despite being one of the first feminist theologians to make a major contribution on women in the gospels, wrote: “She regarded her son as a frivolous character (Mark 3:21) whom she would really have liked to have taken in hand. The early Church always found it a source of great grief that Mary thought so little of the Jesus movement. The fact was hushed up, played down, and finally the evangelist John placed her under the cross. Perhaps this is a hint at her late understanding of the unusual course taken by her son.”

But the increasing numbers of women

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studying theology, largely due to women's ordination among Protestants, has stimulated new approaches. They cannot avoid noticing that more is written in the gospels about Mariam – much more – than about any other woman. Moreover, many are mothers and want to explore what they can learn from the mother of Jesus. But they want to do so in a way that does not contradict their lived experience of what women can do.

Has any Catholic theologian attributed theological reflection to Mariam? The nearest to it, I would have said until recently, is Elizabeth A. Johnson, in her groundbreaking book *Truly Our Sister*, which takes Mariam off her pedestal and makes her one of us. She calls Mariam “a woman with a questioning mind”. But Johnson also thinks that as a woman of Nazareth she would have been illiterate. Illiteracy does not totally rule out theological reflection, but it does make it less likely and limits its scope.

I differ from Johnson only on this last point, for I follow Matthew rather than Luke in seeing her as a woman from Judea who moved to Nazareth in order to hide her son (see my article “The Mary Enigma” in the Christmas 2020 issue of *The Tablet*). In the rural backwater of

Nazareth, who other than an educated parent could have given Jesus his extensive knowledge of the scriptures, as shown at age 12 and in his later disputes with scribes and elders?

Just last week, in the British Library, I discovered that back in 1955 the French Catholic René Laurentin was making even more ambitious claims for Mariam's theological reflection. In a work that has never been translated into English, *Structure et Théologie de Luc I-II*, he dwells on the word for “pondering”, συμβάλλουσα, and says it signifies “an intense reflection, relating to an important problem whose solution is difficult. It is a question of an intimate religious reflection – in the heart – on the infancy of the

Christ, heavy with mystery in its human darkness.” He concludes that Luke “presents the Virgin as a person quick to exercise her intelligence in her faith” and claims that she is also “instructed in the Scriptures”.

Laurentin even goes as far as to allege that “she is not only a witness to the facts, but the first agent of midrashic reflection of which the Gospel of childhood constitutes the final outcome”. By “midrashic reflection” he means the interpretation of Old Testament texts through current events. Laurentin also brings

Who other than an educated parent could have given Jesus his extensive knowledge of the scriptures?

the Annunciation into the picture, which few others have done: when Gabriel's opening words disturb Mariam she “tried to think through (διελογίζετο, *dielogizeto*) what sort of greeting this might be” (Luke 1:28-29).

Taking these three Lucan phrases together, and squeezing them for their last drop of meaning, we could say this about the way Mariam's mind works. She does not just remember and cherish. She also reasons, debates things in her mind, distinguishes between one thing and another (διελογίζετο, 1:29). She puts one thing together with another to work out what it is all about (συμβάλλουσα, 2:19) and does so with heartfelt involvement (ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ, *en tē kardia*, 2:19). She is careful to commit to memory not just the event in general but the words (ρήματα, 2:19,51) so as to go on working out their full significance. Her mental response is both internal and personal, within herself (συν, “with”, 2:19) and very thoroughgoing, through all her being and over a period of time (διὰ, “through”, 1:29; 2:51). This is Mariam the thinker.

THE ONLY element missing, perhaps, from calling her a theologian is that we are not given her spoken or written conclusions in the way we have them from someone like St Paul or John the Evangelist. Is that because it was not the custom for women to make speeches? Or because it was not the custom to record them? But we do have one extended discourse by Mariam in her Magnificat – the longest single utterance in the gospels by anyone other than Jesus.

But given that biblical scholars from the historical critical school dismiss the historical value of the infancy narratives, seeing them as theological constructs, does it make sense to be prising apart individual words and phrases in the story to milk them of their full meaning? Theological awareness determines what you notice, what you remember, what you transmit, and how you shape it. It does not mean that you made the whole thing up; and today in scripture studies there is a new emphasis, on literary analysis. Did Mariam really ponder on the message that her baby was “Christ the Lord”? We do not know. But the gospel Mariam is the only Mariam we have. To try to invent a historical figure by breaking up and sieving the fragments can only leave us with another fictional character, such as Moltmann-Wendel's.

On both Protestant and Catholic sides there have been new approaches to Mariam, and they are opening up unexpected avenues of joint exploration. When the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (Arcic) was struggling around the end of the last century, it was assumed that the position of Jesus' mother was a major stumbling block between the two Churches. Today it seems that, as feminist thinking is developing in Protestant and Catholic Churches, Mariam studies are emerging as something that can bring us together.

Margaret Hebblethwaite is writing a book about women in the gospels.