



# The face of a mother

by Renate Bishopp

**CLOSE YOUR EYES:** what do you see when someone mentions mother? Do you see the face of your own mother? Do you see the vibrant young woman she once was; the wise one who tried to guide you through your most difficult years, allowing you to learn from your mistakes, but shielding you from harm with a firm hand? Does your beloved grandmother's face come into your memory? Is there an adoptive or foster mother who nurtured you when you needed it most?

We all have an image of mother because we've all had a mother and for most of us this image is connected with wonderful warm, happy thoughts. Our mother's face may truly be the first face imprinted on our being. Most likely bonding with our mother happened in the very first moments or days of our existence. Very little moves us more than to see a mother with her little ones, even if the mother is a duck, a cat, a beloved dog or even a hen. The Bible refers to the image of a hen taking care of her brood of chicks even though the subject of caring here is God in Jesus. He has us under His wings like a hen protects her chicks from perceived danger (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34).

In Genesis 1 God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. It was God's intention from the beginning that man and woman should be bound together in one flesh (husband and wife) and that from this union children should be born and raised. This did not change with the fall, except that what should have been only a thing of joy was now fraught with pain, suffering, and danger for the woman. But with the pain, God, in His mercy, also gifted her with a nurturing spirit as she was to become the mother of all the living (Genesis 3:20).

The Bible gives us many examples of mothers in the faith-history preceding the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

God gave His Ten Commandments to Moses, specifying to "honour your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12), with the promises of a long life.

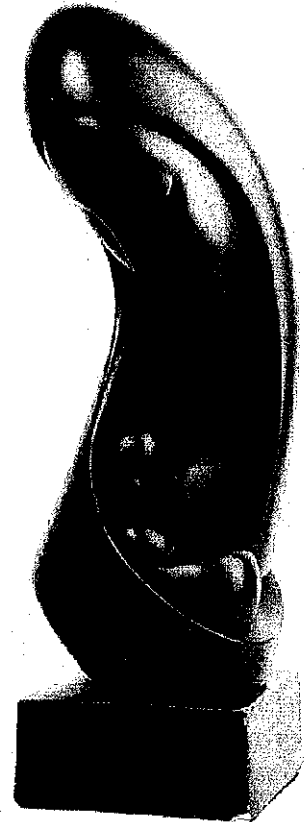
In Judges 5:7 we hear Deborah, the judge, say, "Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel." In a largely male-dominated society, God chose a woman to be the one to bring change to a troubled society.

We read of the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Samuel 2ff), so distraught over her barren state that she implored the Lord in prayer to give her a son only to dedicate him to the service of God. Can any of us, as mothers, imagine what her feelings might have been when the time came to make true her vow to God and take her small son to live with an aging priest? God gave mothers an extra measure of endurance in suffering.

In Isaiah 49:15, the writer is wondering, "Can a mother forget the child she has borne? Though she may forget..." Occasionally, we may hear of a mother who, for some sad reason, abandoned her child but on the whole the bond between mother and child is so strong that Isaiah likens it to the bond God has with us. Doesn't that paint a beautiful picture in honour of mothers?

We all have witnessed a child who has just met up with some kind of hurt, a skinned knee or a bump on the head. What a does the child do? With a cry she runs to her mother! In her arms she expects comfort and healing. In Isaiah 66:13, God promises, "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you."

While Jesus was teaching about the devil and his minions, a woman in the crowd cried out; "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you" (Luke 11:27). Jesus replied, "Blessed rather are those



who hear the word of God and obey it." To the casual observer, while it may seem that Jesus did not value his own mother, nothing could be further from the truth.

Let's look at the face of Jesus' mother. Imagine what it might have reflected when the Angel Gabriel announced she was to become the mother of the Saviour of the world: every human emotion—fear of disgrace as an unwed mother; amazement to be the chosen one, fear of failure to fulfill this important role, uncertainty of the course her life was going to take, agony over the decision to say “yes, I am willing” or “no, I don't want this.” Finally, the smile of acceptance and joy, “I am the Lord's servant,” Mary answered, “May it be to me as you have said!” (Luke 26-38).

The joy was doubled when Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was also expecting a baby under unusual

circumstances. Her unborn leaped in her womb at the greeting of Mary and Elizabeth calls herself blessed by the visit of the mother of her Lord (Luke 43-44). Mary sings her famous song, "My soul glorifies the Lord..." (Luke 1:46-55).

Mary's time of waiting is the start of a long, bittersweet journey as a mother. There isn't a blue nursery waiting in Nazareth but a dark, smelly cattle stall in Bethlehem. No midwife attends to the birth of her first-born son but tired shepherd pay homage to the child. Angels sing as disturbed cattle move in their stalls (Luke 2:1-20). Mighty wise men appear from a far way place and bring gifts she would never have expected (Matthew 2:1-12). During the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple Simeon, an old man, warned Mary of the purpose of her baby and of her own piercing pain at the cruel end of his life (Luke 2:33-35).

The journey takes the young family to Egypt until the danger of death for the child at the hand of a jealous king abates (Matthew 2:13-16). Jesus is an obedient son to His parents and so the event at the temple—staying behind while they travel home—shocks them (Luke 2:41-52). They don't understand how this perfect son could put them through the pain of separation! Jesus knows His destiny, but, to Mary, He's just the child growing up, the child entrusted to her and Joseph. Yet she treasures all that is said about

Mary, likely a widow by now, seems to continue the journey with Jesus as He goes about His ministry on earth. As the first-born son He will take care of her and she continues to take care of Him! She knows He is special and this reflects in the way she approaches Him at the wedding feast in Cana (John 2:3). She trusts that with Him there are answers even as He rebukes her for second-guessing Him.

Finally, at the end of the journey, Mary has to witness the terrible pain and injustice inflicted on her son, not only by her own people but by total strangers. How helpless she must have felt to see Him

suffer, so terribly and so unjustly. Simeon's words may have come to her troubled mind: "a sword will pierce your own heart!" (Luke 2:34 and 35). Jesus knows of His mother's suffering even as He experiences unspeakable pain and

**He commends her to the care of His disciple, John.**

Mary's face is no longer the rapt face of a young woman holding her first son; tear-streaked, likely aged prematurely by the wind and the sun of her desert country, and her life. But she can look forward to the day she will once again gaze into the face of her son, Jesus, when He calls her home and then her eyes will shine again.

So, if are you a mother now, a grandmother or even a great-grandmother, you have probably gone through great joy, sleepless nights, perhaps worries over wayward teens, happy weddings and broken marriages of your children. Sometimes you feel tired, sometimes you yearn for the times that were, the happy ones, and the hope for a bright future. Make-up won't begin to cover your laughter wrinkles or old-age creases and tears may streak your face sometimes. That's what makes it the Face of a Mother.

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