

Adult Education
Characters in John's Gospel
The Mother of Jesus

John 2.1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' ⁴And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' ⁵His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' ⁶Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

John 19. 25-27

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

Notes

With these two passages we move to the source of Catholic veneration of Mary. Some Catholic Mariology (a theology that centers on the Mother of Jesus and attributes saving functions that may or may not be scriptural) is pure invention and ought to be trimmed from authentic Christian piety. Some may be warranted and is unnecessarily neglected by Protestants. Two additional biblical passages need to be added to the above texts from the Fourth Gospel: Revelation 12 and Genesis 3. We'll take these in turn:

It is probable that this drama with the woman and the dragon is a Christian enactment of the prediction in Genesis 3.15. In Revelation, the woman in birth pangs brings forth a male child who is the Messiah and is taken up to heaven. It is generally agreed that the woman of Revelation is a symbol of the people of God. Israel is frequently portrayed as a woman in the OT (see Isa. 26.17, 66.7). In the NT, the Church is depicted as a bride. The drama of the woman, the people of God, spans the two Testaments, as Israel brings forth the Messiah and as the Church gives Jesus to the entire world.

Moving to John 19, we find that the mother of Jesus appears at Cana and she stands at the foot of the Cross. Like the wedding at Cana episode, this scene appears to be highly symbolic. Next week we will discuss the Beloved Disciple. Suffice it to say, the Beloved Disciple also appears to be a symbolic character in John's gospel, depicting the ideal disciple. Since the historical original disciples were all flawed, the Beloved Disciple represents the discipleship ideal that, it is hoped, we will become. Seeing both characters as symbolic—Mary as the people of God or the Church; and the Beloved Disciple as the ideal disciple—the words of Jesus from the cross make much sense. Jesus is launching the Church. The church will be the mother of all disciples. And all disciples will care for the church.

A second symbolic thread is worth mentioning. Mary is also described as a Second Eve. (Jesus is a second Adam). Says Eve at one point: "God has given me a son to replace Abel whom Cain killed." Both women give birth to great epics in the history of salvation; Eve is the mother of sinful humanity, Mary, the mother of redeemed humanity. Someone once pointed out the irony that *ave* (Latin for hail as in hail Mary) is *Eva* spelled backwards.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you find it plausible that the Fourth Gospel would insert characters who would function as representatives of collective entities? Could Mary plausibly symbolize the Church?
2. Why do you suppose that the Fourth Gospel never uses the name of the mother of Jesus?
3. Some commentators have suggested that there is so much symbolism in the wedding at Cana scene that it is moot whether such an event ever actually happened. How many symbols can you spot? (Hint: an abundance of wine as a symbol of the end times is seen in Amos 9.13, Hosea 14.7 and elsewhere)
4. Jesus' bringing together of John and Mary is the last willed act of Jesus' ministry. What new relationship came into being that did not exist before?
5. What do you make of the pervasive use of the term, "woman" in all four texts discussed in the notes? (John, Revelation, Genesis)
6. How does all of this have impact on your assessment of the place of the Church in our lives?