

## **MARY, THE MOST FAMOUS, BEST-KNOWN MOTHER—EVER!**

This past month, as I began my Mother's Day message—on May 10, 2015—I mentioned that *May 10* is also a famous date in history. It was May 10, 1869, when the Golden Spike was driven at Promontory (Utah Territory) uniting the Atlantic and Pacific by rail. That event, for its time, 1869, was probably as momentous as the Moon Landing was a hundred years later, in 1969.

The driving of the golden spike is well-known. Not as well-known is that there were three other spikes that were part of the ceremony: a gold spike from San Francisco, a spike of unpolished silver from the State of Nevada, and one of blended iron, silver and gold from Arizona Territory. What happened at Promontory brought east and west together, united the country.

There was another time and place that spikes were driven—into the hands and feet of our Savior, Jesus Christ—at Calvary (cf. Lk. 24:39; John 20:25). What happened there was also a bringing together: it brought God and man, heaven and earth, together!

The nails or spikes were driven into the hands of Jesus and one (or two) into his feet. (The Eastern Church usually depicts the crucifixion with a separate nail in each foot, the Western Church usually depicts his feet being pierced by a single nail.) But whether there were three or four spikes at the crucifixion, the analogy is not weakened.

At Promontory a telegraph message was sent to the nation, "DONE." At Calvary, a message was sent: "IT IS FINISHED."

The trains no longer follow this portion of the original route in Utah—a much shorter route using fill and trestles was built right across the Great Salt Lake some years later—but the site at Promontory remains preserved as a National Monument. On summer weekends, the famous events of May 10, 1869, are re-enacted, complete with two replica steam engines that meet face-to-face. Someone plays the part of California Governor Leland Stanford who drove the Golden Spike, someone plays the part of Pastor John Todd of Massachusetts who prayed

the Dedication Prayer, and others play various parts.

On a personal note, Arlene and I visited the site in August 2001. At the last minute someone did not show up to take part in the re-enactment and I was asked to fill in. It was only a minor part, with a few lines to say, so I agreed. But it was summertime; I was dressed for summer weather! But no problem: I was handed a long black coat to wear, and a top hat like might be seen in a photo of Abraham Lincoln. And the show went on!

While the events of May 10, 1869 could have provided a grand historical and biblical basis for a message, it was, after all, Mother's Day, May 10, 2015, so I went with that.

I reminded everyone it was President WOODROW Wilson, back in 1914, who had officially set the day aside to honor mothers. I suggested that if any might forget this, just think of me: Woodrow!

When I was in school I knew students with the name Wilson. Often we were seated alphabetically and as the roll was called, it would not be Woodrow, Wilson—but Wilson, Woodrow.

"IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME GOD SENT FORTH HIS SON, BORN OF A WOMAN" (Galatians 4:4).

It is not the mother of Mohammed, or Buddha, or Confucius; not the mother of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob; not the mother of Peter, Paul, or John; not the mother of Luther, Calvin, or Wesley—but it is the mother of JESUS CHRIST who is, by far, the most famous mother ever! If there is any doubt consider this:

For centuries Catholics by the millions have prayed, "...Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

Millions of evangelical Christians also acknowledge Mary, of course—though with a different emphasis. And Jewish people know of her; for, after all, Mary was a young *Jewish* woman.

Even those of the Islamic religion know about Mary, who is mentioned in the *Koran*. Chapter 19 is titled "MARY," from which the following is quoted:

"Gabriel...appeared unto her...She said, I fly for refuge unto the merciful God, that he may defend me from you....He answered, Verily I am the messenger of the Lord....She said, How shall

I have a son, seeing a man has not touched me, and I am no harlot? Gabriel replied, So shall it be: thy Lord saith, This is easy with me....Wherefore she conceived him, and she retired aside with him in her womb to a distant place....This was Jesus, the son of Mary...."

Christians believe Christ came as the *final* Word in God's plan. Prior to this, God spoke in various ways by the prophets, but (as the writer of Hebrews phrased it), "has in these last days spoken to us by his SON" (Heb. 1:1,2). The Islamic religion (which developed several centuries later) acknowledges there were prophets that came before, but in their belief, Mohammed is the last and greatest of all the prophets.

If I mention a priest by the name of Oscar Huber, you will probably not recognize his name; but you have heard *about* him. Watching events on television, he knew the motorcade of the President of the United States would soon pass nearby. He walked a few blocks and joined the crowds lining the street. As the President passed by, seeing his clergy collar and recognizing him as a priest, it seemed the President gave him a special wave. He was pleased.

But little did this Dallas priest realize what was about to happen. Within a short time he would be summoned to the trauma room at Parkland Hospital where he would administer the Last Rites for President John F. Kennedy! Anointing his forehead with oil, praying certain prayers in Latin, he ended with several "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys."

What about Last Rites? What about asking Mary to pray for us at the hour of death? Prayer is not inappropriate at any time. The martyr Stephen prayed as he faced death, but he was calling upon the *Lord Jesus* (Acts 7:59)—not Mary.

Sadly, there are many, while professing to believe in Jesus, who never seem to be quite sure about their standing with God. They are left hanging, hoping somehow they will be *good enough* to make Heaven. Even at the hour of death, it is as though they need *something more*, including help from Mary.

How different was the testimony of Paul: "I KNOW whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (2 Tim. 1:12).

Those who suppose one must be "good enough" to go to Heaven, fail to understand that it is *"not by works* of righteousness which we have done, but according to *His mercy* He saved us....through Jesus Christ our Savior...by his *grace*" (Titus 3:5-7). "For by *grace* you have been saved through *faith*, and that not of yourselves, it is the *gift* of God, *not of works*" (Eph. 2:8,9).

According to ancient custom, to say something bad about one's *mother* was considered a greater insult than to say something bad about the person himself.

Years ago a man who was a member of a church board in Fresno, California, told me the board (with good reasons) asked for the resignation of their pastor. In a subsequent meeting, the pastor agreed to resign, but in telling some of the grievances he had with *them*, used the statement: "You have shamed your mother!" That was the first I had heard that term.

This was probably based, loosely, on Proverbs 29:15: "A child left to himself brings *shame to his mother*." If one does something to bring shame to himself, that is one thing; but to shame one's *mother* was considered much worse!

When Saul was angry at his grown son Jonathan, he called him: "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!" (1 Sam. 20:30). The word "perverse" in this phrase is related to the word *pervert* or *perversion*. *The Living Bible* comes right out and says, "You son of a bitch!" A footnote explains that "this paraphrase is the modern equivalent" of Saul's words.

If the reader will pardon this plainness of speech, it does illustrate how saying something bad about one's *mother* was considered a great insult—more than saying something bad about the person himself.

The reverse was also true. If one wanted to honor a person, he would do so by honoring his *mother*. He would say nice things about *her*. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* says that during the first centuries of the church, no emphasis was placed upon Mary. It could be that devout people, later on, felt that by exalting Mary, they were exalting Christ. However, we have a specific scriptural example to the contrary:

Once when Jesus was teaching, "a certain woman from the crowd raised her

voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!'" (Luke 11:27). Evidently she sought to honor Jesus by honoring his mother.

But notice Jesus' reply: "More than that, *blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!*" This was no lack of respect for his mother, of course; but note the emphasis was not on Mary, but on *the word of God*.

Turning to the parallel setting in Matthew's account (cf. Lk. 11:24-27; Matt. 12:43-45), someone said to Jesus: "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with you.' But he answered and said to the one who told him,

'Who is my mother and who are my brothers?' And he stretched out his hand toward his *disciples* and said,

'Here are my mother and my brothers! *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*.'" (Matt. 12:46-50).

According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, when Mary was conceived, she was in that instant "preserved exempt from all stain of original sin"—the "Immaculate Conception." Yet, it is also acknowledged that "no direct or categorical and stringent proof of the dogma can be brought forward from Scripture." We believe one could go a step further and say this dogma is *contrary* to Scripture (Rom. 3:23).

Mary herself said, "My spirit has rejoiced in God *my Savior*" (Lk. 1:47). If, from her conception, Mary was exempt from all stain of original sin, would she need a Savior? We find this teaching unnecessary. The divinity of Jesus did not depend on an immaculate conception of his mother.

Teachings that would make Mary in some way a Mediator between God and man are contrary to what the Bible says: "There is one God and *one Mediator* between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5,6).

Mary, along with the Twelve Apostles and others, awaited the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. "They all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, *and Mary the mother of Jesus*" (Acts 1:14). I have seen drawings of Mary in which she is given a central

position among the Twelve, six on each side of her, as though they were looking to her in some special way. But the Twelve were not looking to Mary on that occasion, but to their risen Savior, Jesus Christ, the baptizer with the Holy Spirit.

Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke who mention Mary *by name*, the Gospel of John simply refers to her as the mother of Jesus (John 2:1-12; 6:42; 19:25).

In John 2 we read: "There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, *and the mother of Jesus was there*" (John 2:1). Some biblical scholars take this to mean that Mary was *already* there—possibly implying this was the marriage of a close family member. (The village of Cana was less than 5 miles from Nazareth.)

Probably Mary was on the planning committee, for when they ran out of wine, she mentioned it to Jesus. Without going into all the details, we would simply draw attention to Mary's words to the servants: "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5). What a great preaching text! "WHATEVER"! "Whatever HE says"! "Whatever He says, DO IT"!

It was at Nazareth the angel Gabriel had appeared to Mary and said, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women!" (Lk. 1:28). She did not win a lottery or talent contest to put her in this position. Nor was she the only pure and godly young girl in Israel when the fullness of time came. But Mary was the one CHOSEN of God, giving her a unique position among the people of faith.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, she would herself say, "Behold, henceforth, *all generations will call me blessed*" (Luke 1:48). And they have!—and 2,000 years have now passed.

In preaching we do not hesitate to speak of Moses, Elijah, Paul, or Peter as heroes of the faith. We tell how they were used of God, how their lives provide examples for us, etc. Why leave Mary out? Even though extreme views developed later, Mary is among the truly outstanding people of the Bible, *the best-known and most famous mother ever!*

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