

Mary and the Word of God in Luke's Gospel

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In the Post Synodal Apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini* (The Word of the Lord), Pope Benedict XVI calls Mary, “A virgin ever attentive to God’s Word.” According to Pope Benedict XVI, “It is necessary to see more clearly the link between Mary and faith-filled hearing of God’s Word.” The Pope mentions Mary’s familiarity with the Word of God. She speaks and thinks of the Word of God.¹

Luke emphasizes on the Word of God in both the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. The preaching of the disciples is more frequently expressed as “Word of God,” “Word of the Lord,” or simply as “Word” (*logos, rema*). For Luke “Word” is a brief way of summing up the foundation of Christian message (Acts 4:4, 29, 31; 28:25). According to Luke the Word of God is an address by revealing God to human beings from whom a response of faith is sought.² We shall see some texts in Luke’s Gospel which bring out the link between Mary and the Word of God.

Luke 8:19-21:

All the three synoptic Gospels narrate this saying of Jesus about who is his mother, or who are his brothers. However, each Gospel writer places it in a different context. Mark places this periscope after Jesus’ family members come to restrain him when people are saying, “He has gone out of his mind,” and when the scribes of Jerusalem are saying that he has Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” (Mark 3:21-22). Matthew places this periscope

before Jesus' saying about the return of the unclean spirit and the Parable of the Sower. Luke places this periscope after the Parable of the Sower explained. The text also differs in each Gospel.

Mark: "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34b-35).

Matthew: "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 12:49-50).

Luke: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the Word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21).

Mark states that Jesus' mother and brothers came and were standing outside and called him. When Jesus was informed of their arrival, a crowd was sitting around him. Jesus pointing to those who were sitting around him said: "Here are my mother and my brothers!" (Mark 3:34b). Matthew follows Mark. But Luke's version is different. According to Luke Jesus' mother and brothers are not standing outside but could not reach him because of the crowd. When Jesus is informed of their arrival, he does not look at the crowd but says, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the Word of God and do it." Matthew and Mark say that Jesus' mother and brothers are those who do the will of God, whereas Luke emphasizes in the Word of God. The two verbs 'hear' and "do" are expressed in speech in present participles (*akouontes* and *poiountes*) which suggest that they continue to hear and keep on doing.³

The context in which Luke places this periscope (8:19-21) is important. It is followed by the explanation of the Parable of the Sower and Seed in Luke 9:8:11-15. At the end of the explanation of the parable Jesus says, "As for that seed in good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance" (Luke 8:15). "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the Word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). The connection is obvious. Jesus'

mother and brothers are like the seed fallen in good soil.⁴ Genuine relation to Jesus consists not in the descent from common ancestry or blood relation but in the acceptance of God's Word which Jesus preached.⁵

Luke 11:27-28:

In this periscope a woman refers to the mother of Jesus as blessed: "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" Jesus replies: "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and obey it!" Here it is not directly told about Mary. The woman says that blessed is Mary because she gave birth to Jesus. Jesus says that it is not because she is mother of Jesus that she is blessed, rather Mary's beatitude is based on the fact that she has heard, believed, obeyed, kept and pondered the Word.

The fact that Mary heard, kept and pondered the Word is proved in the infancy narrative (Luke 1:38; 2:19; 2:51). These three verses show the attitude of Mary towards the Word of God.

In the annunciation scene, Mary receives the message from angel Gabriel with a reply: "Let it be according to your word [*rēma*] (Luke 1:38). Mary received the message, accepted it and believed it until be fulfilled. That is why when Mary visited Elizabeth, she greeted Mary and said: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:45).

There are two more identical texts in Luke 2:19 and 2:51. When shepherds came to see the child Jesus born in Bethlehem it is said: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Mary kept all these things [*panta syntērei ta remata*] pondering [*symballousa*] them in her heart [2:51]). The verbs used in 2:19 and 2:51 mean "kept, retain." Mary retained and pondered them in her heart. "Mary has preserved in her heart the mysterious words and events that surrounded Jesus' birth and she was trying to interpret them."⁶

In the birth narrative of Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, there are three characters: (1) shepherds who came to see child Jesus in Bethlehem, (2) people who heard about the birth of Jesus as told by the shepherds and (3) Mary. The shepherds announced the birth of Jesus to others and returned home glorifying and praising God. The people who heard it were amazed and nothing more than that. It is Mary who kept the words in her heart and pondered over them. It is like the hearers of the Word of God as told in the Parable of Sower and Seed. In that parable ultimate approval is given to those who hearing the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.

Luke shows that Mary, the Mother of God, was totally shaped by the Word of God. "We too are called to enter into the mystery of faith whereby Christ comes to dwell in our lives. Thus, what took place for Mary can take place in each of us, in hearing of the Word and in the celebration of the sacraments" (Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*).

Footnotes

- ¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing House, 2010) 51-53 (nos. 26, 27, 28).
- ² J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-X* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981), 157. Rudolf Bultmann has noted that "Word of God" stands for Christian *Kerygma*.
- ³ R.E. Brown *et al* (eds.), *Mary in the New Testament* (Bangalore: TPI, 2004) 168. Fn. 180: "These are the ones who hear the Word of God and do it." The phraseology of this saying accords with Lucan theology, e.g., the "Word of God" is a favourite Lucan phrase (Luke 5:1; 8:11; Acts 4:31; 6:2, 7; see Luke 3:2).
- ⁴ R. E. Brown *et al.*, *Mary in the New Testament*, 169.
- ⁵ J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, (AB 28, New York: Doubleday, 1981), 723. (Cf. R.A. Culpepper, *Gospel of Luke*, (NIB IX, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 182.
- ⁶ R. E. Brown, *Mary in the New Testament*, 150.