**MARY – CHRISTIAN BODHISATTVA**

**Sermon preached for 11.00am Sung Eucharist**

**St. Edmundsbury Cathedral**

**Sunday 16 August 2020**

**Blessed Virgin Mary**

In Chinese religion, one of the most popular deities is the goddess Guanyin. Guanyin is celebrated in nearly every Chinese temple. She is popular for her sympathy, compassion and mercy. Like other deities, Guanyin is a bodhisattva. That is a being who has vowed to help other creatures. In Buddhist thought, a bodhisattva is an enlightened being that chooses to delay entering nirvana in order to help others in their suffering. (The Dalai Lama is a bodhisattva.) In Asian religions, people revere bodhisattvas and pray to them for help, in the same way that many Christians appeal to the saints and to Mary for assistance. “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.”

Centuries ago, Guanyin was male. There’s a strong theory that Guanyin became female through the influence of Christianity in the first millennium. [[1]](#footnote-1) In the 6th and 7th centuries, Nestorian Christians moved from the eastern Mediterranean into Asia. They took with them images of Mary. On reaching China, their images of Madonna with child combined with Kuan Yin, the deity people prayed to for children. And a female Guanyin emerged, often portrayed with a child - a Chinese Madonna. Today, female Guanyin statues are common in east Asia. I have seen enormous statues of the Goddess of Mercy in Hong Kong, in Macau and in Thailand.

So much for the history lesson. What are we to make of such syncretism? I’m a fan! Evolving faith, the merging of beliefs has always been part of our Christian faith. And the story of our faith is blessed and enriched by these additions. Take our Christmas story. Since early centuries, Christians have celebrated the three Kings. The Bible only mentions magi and three gifts. How did Mary travel to Bethlehem? On a donkey of course. But there’s no mention of a donkey in the Gospels. In Cairo, Egypt there are many churches dedicated to the Holy Family; based on the story in Matthew’s Gospel of the escape to Egypt after Jesus was born. So in Cairo, the church where the Holy Family stopped for a drink, and the church where the Holy Family rested.

What to make of these additions, these accretions? It’s a significant question in our rational culture; an important question for us shaped by a largely secular education. Celebrating these extra traditions is a way of remembering that there is more than one way to know truth. Delighting in these additions helps our awareness that some parts of reality can’t be accessed by rational powers alone. “It is not so much about believing the impossible but believing that, because our knowledge is limited, there may be many possibilities of which we have not conceived. It is about leaving room for the improbable or at least the unproven; actually not just leaving room, but actively making room. It is the daring act of stacking a claim in the unprovable.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

All this reminds me of visiting Fatima two years ago on the Cathedral Choir tour to Portugal. In 1917, when Europe was in turmoil, Fatima was a remote, rural village. Three children were minding sheep in a field when an angel appeared. The angel told the children the Virgin Mary would visit them with a message of hope and peace. For several months, on the same day each month, the Virgin Mary appeared to the children. By the time of the last appearance in October 1917 word had spread. 70,000 people gathered. Only the children saw Mary, but the crowd experienced the supernatural as the sun zigzagged across the sky and a wave of heat shone on them. In due course the children's visions were judged to be genuine and now millions of people visit Fatima every year on pilgrimage, to connect with the supernatural, to draw near to Mary a Christian Bodhisattva.

The Bible is full of stories of God appearing to humble, ordinary people in insignificant places. Mary herself was an ordinary girl in a small, remote town when the Angel turned up to tell her she would become pregnant with God's child. She responds, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.”

Our Lady of Fatima is a white woman with a message of peace. I have at home an icon of Mary from South Africa. It shows a black Mary with a black Jesus. “Mother of the Streets” – Mother of God and Mother of the homeless. It’s a valuable image in these days when we are aware of racism as well as sexism in our society. “Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord … for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. … he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.’” [[3]](#footnote-3)

Mary with the saints and the angels are supernatural beings who will not rest until we have brought God’s kingdom to birth. Their existence, their purpose is to help us make real the world of the Magnificat. Notice this has two sides. “[T]o work together for that day when [God’s] kingdom comes and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.” [[4]](#footnote-4) And also to see the world in a different way. To wake up, to be aware of the divine all around, to see the intrinsic value of everyone and everything because it is created by God. Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings that see reality as it is. That vision enables these beings of mercy to help us who are enslaved by our illusions to see God’s presence and to respond.

*Canon Matthew Vernon*

*Canon Pastor & Sub Dean*

1. See Martin Palmer in “Kuan Yin: Myths and Revelations of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Denise Inge in A Tour of Bones p. 89 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Luke 1.46-55 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Common Worship* Eucharistic Prayer E [↑](#footnote-ref-4)