

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The person of Mary in John's Gospel – Hodegatria

27 March 2024, St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Homily given at Compline in Holy Week by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

I want to introduce you to the Icon of the Theotokos Mother of God Hodegetria behind me at the high altar. You're getting a sneak preview. She will be properly received with prayer, holy water and incense by the bishop on Easter Day. Then it will be lovingly placed in our Lady Chapel as an aid to devotion and prayer and the lighting of candles.

This Hodegetria Icon has been created by Tracy de Bernhardt Wood¹: I have been working with Tracy for the last year about type, style, design, size, colour. Some of you may have seen her at work last week – I invited her to be Icon-writer in Residence, and to do a talk for us about the Icon, which Chris Eyden organised – you may have been there.

Hodegetria means “she who points the way”. It is one of the earliest types of Icon in the Eastern tradition and originated in the 6th century Monastery of Hodegon in Constantinople. Hodegon means “guide” – for they had sighted guides to support blind or visually impaired pilgrims to places of worship and devotion. We don't know whether the naming of the Monastery or of the Icon came first, but both are connected to ‘she who points the way’. One of the monks, Maximus the Confessor wrote in his *Life of the Virgin*,
“from the barren Anna was born Mary, the illuminator of all, for so her name Mary is translated as “illuminator”.”
“she is the guide in life for all who have gone astray”
“she is the lightning that illuminates souls”².

So you see that Mary is pointing us to Jesus, the way to salvation, whilst also holding and supporting him, because he is still her child to be nurtured and cared for. You'll see that her expression reflects loss and acceptance of loss, knowing what's to come at the cross.
And you'll see that she is looking at you, not at Christ – she is trying to tell you who he is. Likewise, Jesus does not look at her but towards the glory of God and his own journey of sacrificial life and love.

What of the colours and the composition?

What we have here in our midst is quite literally earthly and heavenly, pointing both to Christ's earthy humanity and Godly divinity – and also to Mary's humanity which is completely enveloped in the blues and whites of the Holy Spirit, which happened at the Annunciation. Other details you can notice too – such as Jesus has one shoe on and one off, pointing to his twin natures, human and of heaven (where presumably you don't need shoes).

So – the pigments, the board, the cloth, the glue, the egg tempura – they all from the earth and of the earth, they are earthy things and represent the earth and incarnation.



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But the gold! You perhaps know this – that nearly all the earth's gold has come from meteorites – scientists will tell you that gold is formed in supernova and the neutron star collisions that occurred before the solar system formed. Gold is, literally, the stuff of the dawn of creation. Literally from the heavens. The gold surrounds, envelopes the figures, as God surrounds them with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Icon writers never burnish the gold to make it so shiny that you can see your own face – it should just allow a reflection of the uncreated light all around you.

What we have here in our midst is quite literally of the earth and of the cosmic, the heavenly.

What of Mary's place in John's Gospel?

Mary appears just twice in John, first at the wedding at Cana and then at the cross, the reading we heard just now. This moving scene between Mary, the beloved disciple (who we were thinking about yesterday) and Jesus. David Ford in his commentary³ speaks passionately about how this little moment in the passion narrative creates community, the first Christian community: to the beloved disciple – “look, your mother”, and to Mary, “look, behold, your son”.

Then think back in John's Gospel when Mary pointed out to Jesus that the wine had run out. She didn't understand then that ‘his hour had not yet come’ – but she knew that the way to get things done was to ‘do whatever he tells you’. And here on the cross Jesus' time had come at last – that his calling, to turn the water of human life into the rich wine of God's love, was now at last being fulfilled. Form a loving Christian community – this is your mother, this is your son.

And there's more about this encounter with Mary that John wants to say in his gospel. The changing of water into wine, which happened because of Mary's intervention: we're told clearly, is the first of the sequence of ‘signs’ by which Jesus reveals his divinity (the gold of the icon). Then John in his gospel leaves us to count up five more:

Healing the nobleman's son at Capernaum *John 4.46*

The paralysed man at the pool *John 5.1*

The loaves and fishes *John 6.1*

The healing of the man born blind *John 9.1*

and 6th – The raising of Lazarus (*John 11.1*) – the person we were thinking about on Monday

Tom Wright in his commentary suggests that John cannot have intended the sequence to stop at six: “With Genesis at the back of his mind, the sequence of seven ‘signs’, completing the accomplishment of the new creation, has an inevitability about it”.⁴

And here we are at the foot of the cross. John has told us throughout his gospel that when Jesus is lifted up, this will be moment of God's glory shining through him at full tilt.

Surely the crucifixion itself is the seventh sign. And as if to confirm it, as we heard in the reading, Jesus gives one last cry “It is finished”.

It is all done. He has finished the work that God has given him to do.

And Mary is here – in John's gospel at this pivotal moment in the history of the world.



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What does it all mean.

As you use this beautiful Icon, perhaps for your own devotion and prayer, think on the glory represented by the gold: God surrounds the figures with his grace, and know that God surrounds you with his grace in all situations in your life.

Think on John's gospel: that Mary, at the foot of the cross, is shown as mother – but now not only as mother of Jesus' physical body (in the Icon she is holding and supporting him, because he is her child) – but she is now established as the mother of the 'beloved disciple'. As we think on Canon Matthew's words yesterday (who is the 'beloved disciple' exactly, David Ford asks us?) However you interpret that, Mary is, by extension, mother of all Jesus' beloved disciples: mother of his risen body, the Church. Mary is mother of us all – you and me, his disciples today.

No wonder Christians down the centuries have given honour to the Theotokos, the God-bearer. Have given honour to the Hodegetria, the one who 'points the way' to salvation, depicted in the Icon.

For Mary invites you to join her in pointing the way to Jesus – to be Hodegetria in your own way. To hold Jesus's Church as she holds Jesus, for the family of the church is to be nurtured and cared for.

To form loving community and friendship, supporting each other on life's journey of joys and sorrows.

And in our own lives to bring to birth Christ's heart of love.

*Mary, mother of us all, Hodegetria and God-bearer Theotokos,
pray for us now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.*

¹ To find out more about Tracy's work, see her website: www.debernhardtwood.org.uk

² Maximus the Confessor *Life of the Virgin* Ch 1, para 4

³ David Ford *The Gospel of John*, Baker 2021, p368ff

⁴ Tom Wright *John for Everyone*, SPCK 2004, p127ff

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Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother,

'Woman, here is your son.'

Then he said to the disciple,

'Here is your mother.'

And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said
(in order to fulfil the scripture),

'I am thirsty.'

A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.

When Jesus had received the wine, he said,

'It is finished.'

Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 19.25b-30, NRSV