

Session 1 Who is this woman?

Welcome, and introductions to Tony and Fr Stephen. Introduce each other in small groups later.

Fr Stephen to open with a short prayer.

Thank you for coming tonight. I want to start by reminding ourselves of some basics of what we believe, not because we might have forgotten them, but in order to put Mary into perspective – into the perspective of the beautiful and unfathomable mystery of the Incarnation, God becoming a human being.

Saint Augustine famously said that our souls are restless until they rest in God. The fact that we have all turned out tonight when we could have been going to the pub, watching a film, or whatever, is a sign that we have some of that restlessness, some of that longing for God within us – each in our own way we have encountered God. We are invited, in this earthly life, until our moment of death, to accept God's invitation to the eternal banquet, to walk on the pilgrimage to the life for which we were made, which is to live forever in God's infinite love.

The problem is that the devil does not want us to make that pilgrimage. He wants us to seek comfort in earthly things – money, esteem, luxury and so on. He wants us to be satisfied with this earthy life, content with mediocrity, to tolerate “minor” sinfulness, to make excuses, rely on our own devices. He rejoices when we are lazy, grumpy, resentful, boastful, when we allow any vice to take root in our soul and grow. We are all prone to accept his insidious invitation because of original sin.

Fortunately, as our Christian faith tells us, in the Lord's birth, death and resurrection we have been given access to an infinitely powerful weapon and remedy, whatever we have done, however weak we are. God has expressed his love for us by making our redemption not just sufficient, but infinitely generous and perfect.

Sometimes it can happen that someone we love gets into trouble; this can happen in so many ways - sickness, emotional difficulty, money problems, addiction, dysfunctional relationships. In love we try to enter into their pain, to help them recover their peace and happiness, and above all to give them back their dignity. That is the effect of love – to dignify the beloved. And when we act like this, we act like God. God loves and dignifies each of us. We call it the Incarnation – God entering fully into the messed-up world to redeem us by becoming a man.

In this course we aim to enter more deeply into the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery of Jesus. And an essential aspect of the Incarnation is Mary, not an optional extra, but key to how God dignifies our humanity and raises us up to life with Him. As we will learn in more detail from Fr. Stephen in a moment, in her earthly life she gives us Jesus, and in her heavenly life she leads us to him and distributes his graces to us, her children.

What do we mean by that word ‘mystery’? For a long time I had the impression that ‘mystery’ meant something that you could not understand by reason – a kind of ‘intellectual escape hatch’ that catechists and RE teachers would use if the questions got too tough! I thought a mystery was supposed to be something that you cannot begin to understand. That is more or less the opposite of what a mystery is. In fact, a mystery is not something that you can’t begin to understand, but something you can’t finish understanding. It has no end. It always has hidden depths which start to be revealed when you ponder it in your heart.

So it is with Mary. In a course like this we can only hope to begin, but we could never get to the end, even in a lifetime. So apologies if we leave out anything that is really important to your own devotion to Mary – we left out many things that are important to us too! But we hope that you will leave wanting more. In fact one of the saints we will look at in Session 4, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, had a saying ‘*De Maria, numquam satis*’ which means ‘Of Mary, never enough’.

In a few moments Fr. Stephen will talk to us about Mary in the scriptures, but before he does so I would like us to turn our attention towards Jesus. Who is Jesus?

The Apostles knew the answer to this question. They did not feel the need to put it into written words because they lived it by their lives. However the time came when some of those who were not eye-witnesses to Christ started to debate his nature and to challenge the apostolic faith, and suggest different ideas about Christ. The first few centuries of the Church were very tumultuous, and forced the Church to do what she has done ever since when the apostolic faith is challenged or doubted – to formulate, clarify and defend in words what she knew by faith – what we now call doctrine. Our present formulation of church teaching about the nature of Christ was hammered out in a series of Evangelical Councils – meetings of bishops from all over the Christian world (which was then basically the Roman Empire); every time we say the Nicene Creed we are reciting one of the resolutions of the Council of Nicea (AD 325). These were the clarifications of the early Councils:

First, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is completely God, that is to say in reality “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” in him (Colossians 2:9). No “ifs” or “buts” – Jesus is God.

Second, Jesus Christ is completely human – again no “ifs” or “buts” – Jesus was and is a human being.

Third, those two natures, divine and human, do not exist beside one another in an unconnected way but, rather, are joined in him in a personal unity – Jesus is one person.

We don't have time to trace all the twists and turns in this tumultuous period, but we'll briefly look at three of the early heresies to give a flavour.

One of the early challenges was a heresy called Arianism. This denied the first of the three doctrines we just heard; Arius claimed that Jesus was not fully God, but is a creature who had not always existed; that he was God's son but not God. This

was at one point very widespread, and had support of the Imperial power, and many bishops aligned themselves with the secular power. Again Nicaea condemned this heresy, and much of the Nicene Creed is devoted to spelling out the true divinity of Christ (you probably recognise the words "...true God from true god, begotten not made ...").

Another early heresy called *Docetism*: this denied the second doctrine, and claimed that Jesus was not really human, but just had the semblance of being human, a kind of illusion. This was condemned at the Council of Nicaea (you might recall we say in the Nicene Creed "... he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man").

Finally, to *Nestorianism* which denied the third doctrine. Nestorius was Archbishop of Constantinople; his opponents claimed that he taught that Christ's two natures were not united in a single person, but were united only in that they shared a human body. If this were true it would mean that God had chosen the man Jesus to bear his divine nature in his human body, to be a tabernacle of the Lord. Mary's role in the history of salvation would have been incidental – she would merely have produced in her womb the body that God chose to inhabit; it would have been Christ's body and not Mary's that God chose as a tabernacle for himself. But the Council of Ephesus in 431 said that this was not so. It defended the orthodox position, and spelled out the logical consequence of believing that Jesus was two natures united in one person – that it was Mary who was chosen to be a tabernacle of God. Accordingly, Ephesus gave Mary the title *Theotokos* meaning "God-bearer" or Mother of God.

Some Christians today reject the idea that Mary has such a central role in our salvation, that she was chosen to bear Christ and can be called Mother of God. They are rejecting the teaching of the Council of Ephesus and you could say are the modern descendants of the Nestorian heresy.

But in a way it is not surprising that people were, and are, sceptical. Think about it: here is God, creator of all matter and space and time (and creator of Mary herself, for that matter), eternal, infinite, unfathomable mystery, and yet we dare to call Mary

His mother! How on earth does that work? Well, none of our mothers or fathers actually created us. Yes, we were all biologically conceived, but it was God who created our immortal souls. So, it is perfectly normal for a human mother to carry in her womb the body of an immortal spirit – that is what your mum did, and if you have had the privilege of being a mother, what you have done yourself!

However, the immortal spirit carried by Mary was the Word of God himself come down from heaven. St. Luke tells us that “The Holy Spirit will come upon you ... and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.” (Lk 1:35) – in other words she would bear Jesus whilst remaining a virgin. She gave the Lord her body as a tabernacle for the incarnate Word, asking for nothing in return, but giving her simple, beautiful, trusting *fiat* “be it done to me according to your Word”. The Mother of God.

Well Fr. Stephen, it's time to hand over to you. I hope I have managed to put Mary in the context of the wonderful mystery of the Incarnation to provide an adequate introduction to your section of the talk. Let's hear about Mary in the sacred scripture.

[Father Stephen's section]