

Mary of Nazareth, Prophet of Nonviolence

(December, 2001)

The life of a Christian is a journey on the road to peace. In this culture of violence and war, we need teachers and models who can help us follow the nonviolent Jesus. One way to understand Mary of Nazareth is to see her as a great teacher, model, and prophet of Gospel nonviolence.

Nonviolence is a way of life. It sees all life as sacred, and recognizes every human being as an equal sister and brother, everyone as a child of the God of peace. From this vision of the heart, nonviolence leads us to renounce every trace of violence in our hearts and in our lives, and to work tirelessly to end war, poverty, and oppression in the world.

Nonviolence is active love and truth that seeks justice and peace for the whole human race, beginning with the poor and oppressed. It requires not the taking of life, but the giving of one's life for suffering humanity. It demands sacrifice, commitment, creativity, struggle and persistent reconciliation. It means going with Jesus to the cross and beyond to resurrection. It always rejects war as a human option, insists that there is no just war, and believes in God as the God of peace who calls us to be nonviolent toward one another, come what may.

With the vision of Gospel nonviolence, we see that war can never lead us to peace, that war is not the will of God, that war never works. From this perspective, we realize that the violent U.S. retaliation in response to the September 11th, 2001 attacks only sows the seeds for further violence and terrorist attacks in the future. The only way to peace is through peaceful means.

Mary teaches us how to move deeper and deeper into God's way of nonviolence.

In the Gospel of Luke (1:26-55), we find in Mary's story three basic movements of the spiritual life. When taken together as a whole, the Annunciation, the Visitation and the Magnificat, show how Mary and ourselves can become peacemakers to a warmaking world.

Like Mary, we must become people of contemplative nonviolence who practice active nonviolence and finally prophetic nonviolence.

Mary and Contemplative Nonviolence.

In the story of the Annunciation, Mary sits in solitude, in silent prayer, listening attentively for the voice of God. She is a true contemplative, but she practices contemplative nonviolence! She is a woman of peace. When suddenly the angel appears and speaks, she is frightened, disturbed and confused, but she loves God and has allowed God to fill her with God's own peace. She understands herself as the servant of the God of peace, so she can tell the angel in peace, "Let it be done to me according to your word."

Mary teaches us then that the first step on the road to peace is to become people of contemplative nonviolence. That means, like Mary, we need to sit in the solitude of

peace and listen for the voice of God. It means giving to God all the violence, anger, pain, bitterness and resentment in our hearts, and allowing God to disarm our hearts. Mary invites us to be nonviolent toward ourselves, to enter the solitude of peace-filled prayer.

As we grow in inner peace, we can then become better servants of the God of peace. We will more and more radiate the peace of God, and be willing to do the will of the God of peace, even if we are afraid, confused or in the dark about what it might mean of us, as Mary was. We can receive the gift of peace from God, and be sent as peacemakers into a warmaking world.

Mary and Active Nonviolence

In the story of the Visitation, Mary makes haste to help her kinswoman Elizabeth. The angel did not leave Mary alone, but in effect gave her the support she would need for her vocation, by confiding the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Mary responds by reaching out to love her neighbor. She moves from contemplative nonviolence to active nonviolence. She reaches out to help someone in need.

Mary greets Elizabeth with the word, "Shalom." She speaks words of peace. Elizabeth is immediately filled with consolation, and the women begin telling their stories, praising God, and celebrating with joy.

In the story of the Visitation, Mary shows us the importance of friendship, service, and community for the life of nonviolence. Elizabeth offers three Beatitudes of God's blessings and even the unborn John leaps for joy as he recognizes the God of peace. Mary's spiritual journey has moved from fear and confusion to consolation and joy.

Mary asks us to put our nonviolence into action. What people in need do we reach out to with love and concern? How do we love our neighbors, serve the poor, and stand with the marginalized? Do we speak the words of peace and blessing to one another? Do we build community and friendship with those around us as we journey on the road to peace? How do we move from fear and confusion to consolation and joy?

Mary and Prophetic Nonviolence

In the Magnificat, Mary moves from active nonviolence to prophetic nonviolence. With great joy and confidence, she announces God's reign of peace and justice, and denounces the world's reign of war and injustice. With these words, she not only sums up the message of all the prophets in a nutshell, she reveals herself as Jesus' teacher. The entire Gospel can be found in the Magnificat.

Though Mary is a poor, unwed Jewish woman, who becomes a homeless refugee on the margins of the empire, she proclaims the greatness of God in a new and bold way. Her words mark a turning point in human history!

First, filled with consolation and joy, she speaks out publicly about all that God has already done for peace and justice. "My soul proclaims the greatness of God," she begins. "The God of peace has done great things for me!" Mary knows that she is blessed.

"Holy is God's name. God's mercy is from age to age to those who fear God," she explains. Mary has encountered God and knows that God is a God of mercy, a God of nonviolence, and tells us who God is. God's mercy and nonviolence have acted throughout human history, she says, up to and including today.

Most dramatically, far from being a pious plaster saint, Mary speaks radical, political words about the revolutionary deeds God has done for justice and peace. Her song is about justice for the peace and nonviolence for humanity, but her message is dangerous. People are killed for saying such things! She speaks clearly about economic, social, political conversion, God's nonviolent revolution:

God has scattered the arrogant of mind and heart. God has thrown down the rulers from their thrones. God has lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things. God has sent the rich away empty. God has helped Israel God's servant. God has remembered God's mercy, according to God's promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants forever.

Mary shows God's preferential option for the poor, God's opposition to injustice, tyranny and war, and God's faithful commitment to nonviolence ("mercy") and to the community of nonviolence.

Jesus would have learned these things from Mary, and later, he will expand on them in his Sermon on the Mount. He becomes a prophet of nonviolence because Mary was a prophet of nonviolence.

Just as Mary became a prophet of nonviolence, so too we are called to become prophets of nonviolence and justice. We have to publicly denounce war and injustice, announce God's reign of peace and justice, and point out God's active nonviolence in history. True humility, as Mary shows, means being a servant of the God of peace, and speaking God's word of peace, even to a culture addicted to violence and war.

In the end, Mary becomes not just a person of prayer who does God's will, but a practitioner of nonviolence and a prophet of nonviolence. Her journey is our journey. We have to become people of prayerful nonviolence and inner peace, who put our nonviolence into practice by loving our neighbors and becoming prophets of God's nonviolence to this wartorn world. If we dare follow Mary and Jesus, we too must proclaim God's reign of justice and compassion, love our enemies, and speak out for peace.

Since September 11, 2001, many of us in New York City have tried to love our neighbors by ministering to the grieving families and rescue workers. But we have also tried to love our enemies by calling for an end to the U.S. war on Afghanistan, the sanctions on Iraq, and the oppression of the Palestinians.

These are difficult times, but in the face of nuclear weapons, global poverty, corporate greed and war, we can not sit back in silence. We have to practice Gospel nonviolence, within us, around us, and publicly in our world.

Mary makes it easier by showing us how.