

4 Advent

December 20, 2009

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### **“Who is Catholic?”**

The fourth Sunday of Advent brings up the story of Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth in Judah. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary travels all the way south to Judah to visit Elizabeth who was expecting her first child.

The journey must have been long and difficult for Mary who was expecting herself. The lines written in Luke about their meeting become famous in the early church and even after and are used in the Canticule we know as the Magnificate.

The Christmas story, the Nativity, is also Mary's story. It is a profoundly Jewish story and Mary fits the model of Jewish women heroines that include Sarah, Rachel, Ruth, Judith, and Esther.

Like them, she is especially called by God and given a difficult task to do. Like them her life is one of service to God, she is faithful on all aspects of her faith. There is a mistaken notion that devotion to Mary is somehow peculiar to Catholics and by that I mean Roman Catholic. The church in England, from the earliest of times, had a special place for Mary in their faith. Many churches had a side chapel that was referred to as the “Marian Chapel.” When in 1534 Henry VIII pulled the church in England out of allegiance to Rome, the entire population and all the churches joined him. In 1535 there were no churches in England called “Roman Catholic churches”, all churches belonged to the newly named Church of England. Both Henry and the English Bishops did not initially regard themselves as Protestant. They held the same faith and doctrine as they did prior to the break, they had the same Bishops and they occupied the same churches; with the same congregations. They continued to worship using the Mass or as we say, the Eucharist. Their church calendar celebrated the same seasons and they practiced seven sacraments.

It is not until 100 years later, that Thomas Cromwell closes many churches and destroys statues and stain glass windows, that we see any change in churches. After Cromwell's death and the Restoration of the Monarchy, churches in England returned to the way they were before and the way they are today.

Around 1536 Henry VIII had asked Archbishop Thomas Cranmer to write a people's prayer book in English. The only prayer book prior to that was the Roman Missal, in Latin.

In writing the Book of Common Prayer, Cranmer began by taking the daily office, morning and evening from that used by monks in monasteries. The Eucharist was more or less copied verbatim from the Rome missal but translated into English, excluding references to Popes.

When Elizabeth I passed the Act of Supremacy into law, on MAY 8, 1559 she was the one who used the title “the Protestant church of England.” This made her church the established church of the land, but in no way alienated her with puritan and Lutheran Protestants, who she detested.

Church worship, services and even the wearing of vestments went on unabated, with the one great change, that now Elizabeth was the head of the church and attendance was compulsory. Holy water fonts stayed at the door of the churches; people continued to bless themselves, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Baptismal fonts were used, but crucifixes were replaced by a simple cross.

Throughout England, churches continued to be named after Saints, Mary, John, Peter, Paul, Andrew, and Jude being the most popular.

When asked to what extent we Episcopalians are Protestant, Bishop Paul, an author of early Episcopalian history writes:

“The Episcopalian church is not Protestant in the sense that we did not belong to Martin Luther’s reformation. We are Protestant in the sense that Henry VIII and the people of England protested against Papal taxes and corruption and broke away to rule their own church politically. Are differences with our Catholic cousins are not theological or liturgical; they are purely political. We are not catholic in the roman sense, but we are catholic in the apostolic sense. In the Book of Common Prayer we read: “One, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” This is to use the word ‘catholic’ in its generic sense to mean universal. There are many churches around the world that use the word catholic to emphasize their links to the Apostles.”

We are not Roman Catholic, we are Anglican Protestants who believe we belong to a universal church of Christ. To that extent Mary plays an important part as the 1<sup>st</sup> among saints and as the god bearer, who follows her son as a disciple.

I hope this clarifies for many or position n Mary and our relationship to the Church of Rome. From time to time, people get confused simply because they do not know the history. I refer you once again to the Book of Common Prayer, especially the catechism and doctrine found in the book.

People who persist with the phrase: “We are becoming too catholic” need to know their history. Roman Catholicism is as close to us as Anglican Episcopalians as brother and sister. Truth be told, we are much more similar to Catholics than we ever could be to the Milford Bible church, who do not share our worship, Eucharist, sacraments or doctrine. Instead of disparaging our catholic friends, let us pray for them that their mission and ours may bring salvation, the salvation of Christ, to those who need it.

Amen+