

Novena to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart - 31 August to 8 September 2019

OUR LADY OF THE SACRED HEART: MOTHER-DISCIPLE

Day 1: Saturday, 31 August – Mass and Readings for the Feast of Mary’s Nativity

- Romans 8:28-30 (those he has called according to his purpose);
- Ps12:6-7 (With delight, I rejoice in the Lord);
- Mt 1:1-16 or Mt 1:18-23 (...Joseph, the husband of Mary, of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ.)

MIRIAM OF NAZARETH: THE JEWISH GALILEAN

Good morning. I am happy to be back here and to be with you again, this time in this Novena to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. I would like to see this Novena as a 9-day pilgrimage to the Heart of Jesus in the company of Mary. It is Saturday and we begin this Novena with the prayers and readings from the Mass of the Feast of Mary’s Birth. In these nine days that we will be together, I hope to share with you who Mary, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, is for me, the woman I have come to know as Mother-Disciple of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. At the end of the Novena, it is my hope and prayer that we will have encountered Mary anew, understood this title of hers better and have come to a clearer sense of what devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart asks of us, here and now.

Today’s Gospel is one that is familiar to all of us, the account of Jesus’ birth and the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew. We read this text every year, at Christmas time. It gives us, from Matthew’s point of view, Jesus’ family tree. Among other things, it makes a very clear point, that Jesus, the Christ, was a historical human being, with a mother, a father and ancestors that go back many generations. For those who were in the Sacred Heart Novena with me last year, you would remember that I founded my reflections on the humanity of Jesus as we reflected on him as One who loved with a human heart. I would like to do the same in the case of Mary. I would like us, at the beginning of this novena to look at Mary as a historical human being, that Jewish Galilean woman who was the Mother of Jesus of Nazareth. I follow the advice of an author, John Pilch, when he said “Authentic devotion to the Blessed Virgin should at the very least be based upon respectful understanding of her. This should entail a respect for her native Mediterranean culture and the roles she played in that culture.” So on this first day of the Novena, I invite you to travel with me back in time, to the first century. With the help of historical research and the power of our own imagination, let us together visit the little village of Nazareth in search of Mary, the woman God has chosen and called to become the mother of His Son.¹

The first thing we discover is that in this village they speak Aramaic (with a Galilean accent) and that in their language, she is called Miriam. We arrive in the village on a hot August day and we are not impressed – it is very dusty and we imagine how muddy and smelly this place could be when the rains come. It is a small farming village in fertile lower Galilee, there are no paved streets, no public buildings, no public inscriptions, no marble, no mosaics, no

¹ This imaginative reflection is based on research about first century Nazareth. A detailed presentation could be found in Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* by (Continuum, New York, 2003) or see Merle Salazar, *Miriam of Nazareth: A Jewish Galilean*, *East Asian Pastoral Review*, Volume 42 (2005) Number 4.

frescoes – in summary, no luxury items of any kind, a small Jewish village with no political significance. Really...can anything good come from Nazareth? The population is about 300 to 500 people consisting of peasants who work their own land, tenant farmers who work land belonging to others and craftsmen who serve their other needs. Miriam is married to one of the craftsmen in the village, Joseph, a *tekton* (we can say a carpenter) and her son Jesus has the same work as his father. Being primarily an agricultural village, Nazareth could not provide enough work for *tekton*'s like Joseph and Jesus so they do some work in the nearby Roman city of Sepphoris. Miriam, like the other people of the village is Jewish. Although they are far from the Temple in Jerusalem, every now and then, particularly during the big feasts, the villagers of Nazareth go up to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. Miriam and the other women are usually the ones in charge of the preparations for these pilgrimage feasts. In the village, they go to the local synagogue on Sabbath and in their home they faithfully share the Sabbath meal where Miriam, like other women, leads the lighting of the Sabbath candles.

We stay in the village and start walking around and we meet several women and we realise that one of them is Miriam. Well...we look at her from head to toe...her clothes are quite plain and very ordinary, just like what the other women are wearing, she has dark hair, dark eyes and dark skin! She is not wearing a crown...instead, she has an earthen jar on her head...she seems to be on her way to the well to get water. The women are chatting about (surprisingly we understand their conversations). They are talking about the many things that keep them busy – gathering, processing and cooking food, making clothing, doing backyard gardening, and of course caring for the small children and teaching them about their traditions and their faith. These women belong to households that are big by our standards; they are extended families that can number from 30 to 100 persons at any one time! Miriam, like the other women in their household, learns from the older ones and teaches the younger ones. We look at her more closely and we see a skilled and physically strong woman whose body shows the marks of poverty and hard work.

We follow Miriam home and there we find some members of her household, men and women, talking. They are talking about their current political and economic situation. Galilee is part of the vast Roman Empire which grew by conquest. Two significant aspects of life in their community were shaped by the Roman conquest. First, the lower levels of their society have swelled with the large numbers of slaves and other persons displaced by wars. Second is the constant pressure of taxation. They have to pay taxes to the Roman emperor. In Galilee, under Julius Caesar, as much as a quarter of a year's harvest could go to taxes to Rome. Then they have to pay taxes to Jewish rulers like Herod and their agents, the tax collectors. Still add to these political taxes is the temple tax. The taxes are simply too heavy to bear. They lament at how difficult life is. They recall what happened about 30 years ago now. Herod the great was the undisputed master of their country. He was a clever politician and a violent man. The first part of his reign was marked by the cold blooded and systematic elimination of anyone who might have contested his authority. Then during the second part of his reign, he embarked on lavish and magnificent cultural improvements which were mainly financed by taxes. He is remembered for the magnificent restoration of the second temple in Jerusalem. He never really gained the support of the Jews who hated him. When he died, resentment exploded in revolt all over Palestine. Facing widespread uproar, the Romans responded with brutal efficiency. Villages were burnt and their inhabitants were sold to slavery. The older members of the household look at Miriam - when this was happening, Miriam was only about 15 years old, a young married woman with a small baby.

Sadly, life did not improve in the years that followed. Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great's sons, inherited Galilee and was very much like his father. He first rebuilt Sepphoris to make it his capital city and then built for himself a magnificent capital in Tiberias. With the Roman cities so near, the economic gap between the peasants in the villages and the upper class in the Roman cities became very obvious. And this is not all, aside from the Herods, the people were also ruled by Roman procurators, who were the financial and military administrators ruling the imperial provinces. The Roman procurator of Judea was Pontius Pilate known as a high-handed and stern ruler. These were men Miriam knew by name, Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate, men who later will condemn her son to death.

The sun is now setting in Nazareth and our visit has come to an end. We find ourselves back in the 21st century, year 2019, here in Cork. We have just met Miriam, in the village where she spent most of her life. What Pope Paul VI wrote back in 1974 comes to mind – “[Marialis Cultus 120] *Mary, in fact, is one of our race, a true daughter of Eve - though free of that mother's sin - and truly our sister, who as a poor and humble woman fully shared our lot.*”

This poor and humble woman, Miriam of Nazareth, is the woman we also call Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. In this Novena, we invite Miriam, to journey with us – to be present here among us - we ask her to accompany us in this, our nine-day pilgrimage to the Heart of her Son. Amen.