

Hail Mary, Full of Grace

December 21, 2008

(Advent 4 - Year B)

Luke 1: 26-38

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Hail Mary, full of grace.

The Lord is with thee.

*Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

And so begins a famous prayer that has become a part of the Roman Catholic landscape for centuries, the prayer known as the Hail Mary.

Yesterday, at the lunch table, my family asked me what the topic of today's sermon was going to be.

When I announced that the sermon was going to be about the Hail Mary, our sons immediately responded:

“Are you going to preach about a football play?!”

It was then that I decided that some teaching about the Hail Mary might be in order.

The prayer known as the Hail Mary is actually rooted in Holy Scripture and the words occur in our Gospel reading from Luke that we just heard.

In Luke's Gospel, the angel Gabriel is sent by God to a young girl named Mary.

The angel Gabriel's first words to Mary are:

“Greetings, favored one!

The Lord is with you.”

Thus, the first words in the prayer known as the Hail Mary:

“Hail Mary, full of grace.

The Lord is with you.”

That first word, ‘hail,’ is actually a greeting, which can be translated as

‘greetings’ or as ‘rejoice’ or as ‘hail.’
And that first phrase, “Hail Mary,” in Latin is translated as “Ave Maria.”
And the Latin version of this prayer, the “Ave Maria,” has been set to
music throughout the centuries and is popularly sung at many
weddings.

The second part of the Hail Mary prayer comes from an episode a few
verses later in Luke’s Gospel.

In that part of the Gospel, the newly-pregnant Mary goes to visit her
relative Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth sees Mary, the first words that Elizabeth says to Mary
are:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Thus, the beginning of the prayer that has been said by Christians and
desperate quarterbacks for years and years:

Hail Mary, full of grace.

The Lord is with thee.

*Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

There is a third part of the Hail Mary prayer, the sentence that prays:

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of
our death.*

However, that part was added on much, much later - sometime in the
1500s.

My first real encounter with the Hail Mary prayer came when I was a
high school student.

When I was a freshman in high school, a classmate of mine, a girl
named Teresa, died in a car accident.

Teresa grew up on the street behind where I did, so I knew her as a
childhood friend.

When Teresa died in that tragic car accident, our entire high school went
into a state of mourning and school was let out early so that anyone
who wanted to could go to her funeral.

It was well-known that Teresa's family was a very devout Roman Catholic family.

And I can remember that the night before her funeral, there was a Catholic rosary service held at the local funeral home.

I did not have my driver's license yet, but my parents dropped me off at the funeral home, to pay my respects.

I sat in that funeral home chapel and knelt down, as all of the Roman Catholics got out their Rosary beads and began to pray.

And the prayer that I heard, over and over again, was the Hail Mary:

Hail Mary, full of grace.

The Lord is with thee.

*Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

Holy Mary, Mother of God,

pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

As an Episcopalian raised in a low church, Protestant tradition, I did not quite understand what was going on.

Yet, even at the age of 15, I did understand that this prayer - referring to Mary, the mother of Jesus - was a deeply spiritual moment in a time of great desperation.

And it was a spiritual moment for me, as the Hail Mary prayer was a source of mysterious comfort in a time of grief for my friend.

As Anglicans and as Episcopalians, we sometimes don't focus on Mary very much as a very important part of our spiritual life.

But, we should have a sense and appreciation for the role of Mary in the Christian story.

For Mary is the only person who sticks by Jesus, from cradle to the grave.

Now, I know that we do not worship Mary, just as we do not worship any other human being.

We do not pray to Mary as our mediator to God, for that is what Jesus does for us.

But, just as we will sometimes ask a friend to pray for us,
We can and do ask Mary, and all the people who have gone before us, to
think and pray about us.
Because we are all in one family in heaven and on earth, one family who
cares and prays for each other.

On November 23, 1984, on the day after Thanksgiving, Boston College
played the Miami Hurricanes in a football game at the Orange
Bowl in Miami.

Boston College was behind, 45-41, with just a few seconds left on the
clock.

The Boston College quarterback, Doug Flutie, went back for a Hail
Mary pass, throwing the football 63 yards into a mass of players in
the end zone.

The ball was miraculously caught by Gerard Phelan and Boston College
won the game, as a result of one of the most famous Hail Mary
plays in football history.

In life, sometimes we feel like there is just 1 second on the clock and the
scoreboard is not in our favor.

Sometimes we feel like we are 63 yards away from the end zone.

Sometimes we feel like we are the underdog.

And we want someone to stick with us, from cradle to the grave.

We want someone to pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our
death.

So, we send up a Hail Mary pass in the form of a prayer.

And we know that Mary understands our prayer of desperation.

For Mary was an underdog as an unwed mother.

Mary knows what it is like to stick with someone, from cradle to grave.

Mary knows what it is like to watch your son die.

And Mary knows what it is like to gaze in amazement at the empty tomb
and at a miraculous catch in the end zone.

In just 3 more days, we will return to this church, or to a church in some
other town, to worship the newborn Jesus.

We will kneel down and sing about that silent night.

We will sing about that graceful mother: “round yon virgin, mother and child.”

We will desperately pray for God’s whole family, both in heaven and on earth:

Hail Mary, full of grace.

The Lord is with thee.

For on that holy night, we throw up a Hail Mary,
That God will miraculously be born in us, once again.

AMEN.

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