

# Mary and John

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**WE** STOOD RECENTLY beside a stone cross, a monument to the Scottish heroine Flora MacDonald. It stands on a hillside, remote above the sea on the Trotternish peninsula on the mountainous Isle of Skye off the northwest coast of Scotland. It was one of those rare days in the Scottish highlands when the sky is clear, the air reasonably warm, and just sufficient breeze blows to prevent the midges from flying and biting. The view out to sea was tremendous, with the mountains of the Outer Hebrides forming a spectacular skyline. Overhead a skylark was singing its heart out. Around us lay the graves of perhaps a hundred others, mostly quite ordinary local people. And I thought, "What a beautiful place to be buried in, to rest in quiet earth, away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life".

And all of a sudden the sadness of the scene came over me: that all these, great and small, men, women and children, who had lived, loved and suffered, should be reduced to this, to lie under the ground for ever, to decay, to become a dead part of the living landscape, totally unaware of the beauty of life and hopefulness above them. This is what we all deserve because of our failure to live up to the standards our God has set us. Yet our heavenly Father is nevertheless a merciful God; His mercy lies partly in the unconsciousness of death.

## "Slept with his fathers"

Thirty-six times in Kings and Chronicles, and nowhere else in the Old Testament, we come across the phrase "slept with his fathers". It is used with equal reference to the kings of Judah and of Israel. The difference is that, whereas the kings of Israel died and might have been buried anywhere handy—there is no sense of historical continuity in their story, just as you might expect—with the kings of Judah their death is usually accompanied by such words as "and they buried him in the city of David".

The very first use of the phrase concerns King David himself in 1 Kings 2:10: "So David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David". This must have become the traditional burial place for almost all Judah's kings. The location of David's tomb was clearly known even in the time of Jesus, for Peter says in Acts 2:29: "Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day".

At the Breaking of Bread, brothers and sisters, we stand, not on a lonely hillside before the cross of a Scottish heroine, but on the hill of Golgotha before the cross of Christ. We stand, sisters, with Jesus' mother, with her sister Salome, with Mary the mother of James and Joses, with Mary Magdalene; we stand, brothers, with John, with Joseph from Arimathea, perhaps with Nicodemus, or with other disciples standing further off among the watching crowd; and we are watching a dying man, a man we love, a man for whom we all weep.

It was to this hour that our Lord looked long before his enemies warned him of the danger of going up to Jerusalem, of the possibility that Herod would kill him: "And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk. 9:51); and later in Luke that determination shows itself again: "Nevertheless I must walk to day, and to tomorrow, and the day following" (13:33). And Jesus continues with one of the reasons that he has firmly in mind: the footsteps he is following are those of the rejected prophets: "for it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem".

He knows already the path he must tread, the path of the cross, and the inability of his closest disciples to understand what must take place: the cross before the crown. He knows they will all fall asleep at the hour of his greatest need, that they



Picture: Flora MacDonald's memorial, Isle of Skye; Adam Cuerden/Wikimedia Commons

will all forsake him; he knows one will betray him, and he knows which one. He knows this from the prophets, as he knows that he must be beaten, abused, spat on, denied justice, mocked, cursed and crucified.

### **A mother's grief**

So we stand and look up at him, nailed, in the heat of the day. Put yourself, sisters (and brothers), into the mind of his mother Mary. This is your son. Your thoughts go back thirty-three years to the uncomfortable journey to Bethlehem, the worry of not being able to get proper accommodation for the night, and of the onset of labour, and the desperate refuge of the stable; the pain of his birth in those primitive conditions; the joy of having your first-born laid upon your knee and feeding at your breast.

You remember the visit of the shepherds and the voices of the angels; the unexpected exile to Egypt; the horror of hearing of the slaughter of so many young boys among whom, but for God's intervention, your first-born would have perished; the anxious return and long journey north to Nazareth. You remember that this son had always remained so special among your expanding family, obedient and responsive to your love. You remember too the agony of losing him at the age of twelve on that Passover visit to Jerusalem; the fear that God would hold you accountable for this dereliction of duty; the support of Joseph during those terrible three days; and the relief of finding your child at last in the place where you should have sought first.

You stand now and see him upon the cross, this child, this young man who had so calmly taken over the duty of carpenter and provider for the household when Joseph had died, and how he had given up that responsibility only when your other sons and daughters were able to provide for you and for themselves. You knew in your heart that he was special, God-given.

Over the past three-and-a-half years he had travelled the land teaching about the Kingdom of God, calling men and women to repentance, performing many notable miracles. His reputation had grown quickly, spreading beyond Galilee, throughout Judea and even into despised Samaria and the lands of the Gentiles around Israel. He had become the greatest prophet since Moses, with the same characteristics of humility and leadership, of firmness with those who chose the road of hypocrisy in their religion, yet sympathy with those in real need of spiritual and physical help.

You just *knew* he was the Messiah. His birth, his development as a child, as a teenager, as a young man and now as an adult in the prime of life all told the same story. You had kept a keen eye on his whereabouts during these last few years since he had left home. You had listened carefully to reports of his preaching; you had accompanied your other sons when they had travelled to see him; you had even travelled around to be with him from time to time; you had seen for yourself some of the miracles he had performed, and had every confidence in him. The earnest expectation of many was that he should lead his people to free them from the Roman yoke, and you had shared that hope.

As the crowd surged through the streets and out through the gate up to this place of execution, you had hoped moment by moment for the miracle that would free him from this nightmare. But no miracle came. You could not bear to watch or listen, and were so grateful for the support of your weeping friends and relatives. Each hammer-blow on the nails was an agony in your own heart. Now there was no escape from the reality.

It had all come to this! Your baby, your child, your boy, your son, nailed upon a cross. You remember the words of aged Simeon to you in the temple as he cradled that baby in his arms: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also . . .)" (Lk. 2:34,35). How right he had been! How difficult it had been to know fully what he meant by "a sign which shall be spoken against"! It was indeed as if a sword were piercing your own soul too.

### **A cousin slain**

Put yourselves, brothers (and sisters), into the mind of John. This is your relation on the cross. You have not always been close friends. Up to three-and-a-half years ago you had been brought up in different towns, Jesus in Nazareth, you—a man of means—on the shores of Galilee working in your father's fishing business with James your brother.

But then things had changed. You had become convinced that your cousin from Nazareth was special, probably the long-promised Prophet, and you had given up your livelihood to become part of his group of disciples, becoming more and more convinced that he was indeed the Messiah. But the biggest change, you had to acknowledge, was that earlier you had become known with your

brother as a Son of Thunder. You were still given to outbursts of thundery zeal, as when you wanted to call down fire from heaven on those inhospitable Samaritans and Jesus would not let you! But on the whole you knew you had changed to a much milder sort of person, and had developed a close spiritual friendship with your leader. But all for what? Here he was, nailed in agony on a cross.

Indeed, you felt privileged to be one whom Jesus specially loved. You appreciated being one of the three who had been present when Jairus' daughter had been raised to life. She had been dead—truly dead. There was no doubt about it: the mourners had been present and Jesus had turned them out. Then he had taken her hand, simply spoken the words; she had stirred, breathed; and he had helped her off the bed and handed her over to her amazed and delighted parents.

You felt privileged, too, to have been taken for private prayer up that mountain only a couple of months before. It had been like an amazing dream; but you knew it must have been real because the three of you had all had the same experience. Jesus had been transfigured before you and had been talking to two other companions, whom you all recognised to be Moses and Elijah. How awe-inspiring and frightening to think you had been in such company! And then Jesus had asked you not to mention to anyone what had happened.

Yet what a change had come about! Twenty-four hours ago you noticed your leader had become agitated and concerned about something; Judas had disappeared; and after your Passover meal Jesus had taken you all across Kidron to the olive garden, there to pray in the darkness. He had seemed distinctly disturbed, as though he knew something was about to happen, and had again taken the three of you ahead of the others.

Telling you that he was troubled, he asked you to keep awake and watch out, and had gone just a little way further. And you had all been so tired, the next thing you knew, Jesus was waking you up and reproving you. How ashamed you had been; but it had happened again, then again. And the third time you woke it was to the sound of armed soldiers and a crowd and the light of flaming torches, a scuffle and cries of pain; and in your bleary-eyed confusion you had panicked and made your escape into the darkness.

Following the soldiers at a discreet distance, you had found yourself at the high priest's palace, and Peter was now at your elbow. Jesus was already inside; and because you had business

contacts with the household you were able to gain entrance, and get Peter in as well. Standing in the shadows you had watched with increasing terror the so-called trial and the physical ill-treatment being meted out. You suddenly realised Peter was no longer there—disappeared, not seen since.

They had bundled Jesus off to Herod and Pilate, and then to Golgotha, where they had crucified him. You had followed in the crowd, and, once the deed was done and the soldiers were occupied in dicing over clothing they had taken off the victim, you had dared to approach the women, who had been much less in fear of reprisal, and had taken your stand discretely behind Jesus' mother. There on the cross was your cousin, your dear friend, your Messiah. And with Mary you wept.

### **“The Lord is risen indeed”**

How you both got through the rest of the day was difficult to remember: the jeering crowds, the taunting Jewish leaders, the armed soldiers who kept the crowds well away, the unnatural three-hour darkness, the agony of it all. Then Jesus spoke to you, Mary: “Woman, behold thy son!” And to you, John: “Behold thy mother!” Next, “I thirst”; then, “It is finished”. And he was dead.

Before night set in, Joseph of Arimathea came with Nicodemus to undertake the gruesome business of taking the body down off the cross. You, John, could not bear to watch; but some of the women did, and went to see where it was to be laid. You, John, took Mary away to your own home. This prophet perished at Jerusalem; this son of David also was ‘buried with his fathers in the city of David his father’. But it was in a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid, for a new generation of those to be buried with Christ.

But, three days later, what joy for John to find the empty tomb, to meet his Saviour, to begin to learn the reality of all that the prophets had spoken! What joy for Mary to behold her son, her Saviour; to know that the wound in her soul was healed and that, though he had been spoken against, the thoughts of many hearts would be revealed! And, as we share bread and wine, let us remember that we are not left standing before the cross or the newly occupied sepulchre. We too are meeting our risen Lord from the dead, that by his wounds we are healed from our iniquities, that the thoughts of our hearts are indeed revealed to him. With joy let us look with longing to the prospect of meeting him at his return, and thank God now for His unspeakable gift.