

When the Eighth Day Came

This day is the most ancient feast of the Mother of God, and its title reminds us of the momentous decision to give Mary this title. It finally happened at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, but the title had been used by many people before then, being first found in the works of Origen (before 250). It's always been a daring phrase. Bringing together the most august and awesome of words (*God*) and the most human and earthly (*mother*) was always going to produce something of a hot potato, and it was in the great argument about *who Jesus is* that the phrase becomes most contentious.

What My Mother Gave Me

My parents gave me my generation in the world. As ministers of God, they gave me life, or a share in the life God gave to them. In my special case, they gave me my character, my appearance, my talents, my genetic dispositions, my emotional make-up and cast of mind. They probably gave me my desires and my appetites, some of my dislikes, and my susceptibility to various diseases. My father spent nine months before I arrived wondering how he was going to pay for me and where they were going to live (in 1947 it was a cold, bleak spring). But my mother was much more intimately concerned with me, as she fed me and housed me and warmed me herself, and built up with me a relationship that would never be broken.

What God Gave Me

Behind all that complexity lay the steady hand of the Creator, watching the unfolding of his gifts as they came out in our small family. He was there in every movement of generosity or anxiety, listening to every prayer, and inspiring every act of love and care as need arose or was answered. He rejoiced in my parents' fidelity and selflessness, and helped them to accept the colicky, fractious, smiley and grateful child they had brought to the light. God didn't break in at midnight with silver spoons or magic solutions. We all bore a lot of burdens, and learnt hard lessons. It was a ramshackle

and toppling prosperity, and there were plenty of dodgy decisions and questionable solutions as our lives unfolded together. In other words, we were like every other family, and ended up slightly ashamed, and deeply proud of one another.

The Mother Of God

What Origen believed was that Mary and Joseph - despite their manifest sharing in that messy business, human family life - were graced beyond other families in the vocation they received. The Gospel of Matthew tells us of the decent Joseph, who wrestled with his doubt and perplexity as a bridegroom, but found perfect obedience as *a dreamer of dreams and a seer of visions*: and the Gospel of Luke gives us Mary, as the one *full of grace*, who was readied by God to transmit to Jesus a similar human openness to grace which belongs only to God (Jesus himself said: *only God is holy*). We know nothing at all of the rest of Mary's gifts to her son: we don't know if he was tall or short, dark or fair, prone to this or that illness, or whatever. We create for him an image of perfection, as if even physical blemishes would be inappropriate for the Son of God. Of course, when he is hanged on the Cross his vulnerability is fully apparent, and he fulfils what Isaiah says of the Servant who Suffers, "*Without beauty, without majesty we saw him: no looks to attract our eyes.*"

Truly God, Wholly Human

So perhaps the octave-day of Christmas asks of us a very precise meditation, the imagining of a Jesus completely human: a demanding, noisy, inconvenient baby like all of us, one who woke in the middle of the night and wouldn't sleep at any price, one who asked questions until they begged him to go away, one who broke the family china and tipped up the glue-pot and cut himself on the saw after he'd been told and told: one who was loved by a hard-pressed mum and a patient dad, who had to hear him say: *My mother and my brothers are the ones who listen to the Word,*

and do it. They responded, and called him
Jesus, which means Saviour. *Fr Philip*