

## 'AL MYGHTY AND AL MERCYABLE QUEENE'

AIDAN BAKER, C.P.

**L**EARNED critics have so learnedly and so critically examined and analysed Chaucer, both the man and his works, that it is easy for us to forget that we have more in common with him than many even of his greatest critics have. For like us he was a Catholic. More fortunate than us, he lived at a time when England was Catholic. It was in Chaucer's own lifetime that the Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury spoke for all England when he said: 'We English, being the servants of Mary's special inheritance, and her own Dowry, as we are commonly called, ought to surpass all other Christian nations in the fervour of our praise and devotion.'

There can hardly be a more appropriate phrase than that—'the fervour of praise and devotion'—to describe Chaucer's poem in honour of our Blessed Lady, which he called his 'A.B.C.'; 'as if,' says Chesterton, 'it were the first elements of his childlike faith'. It is more prayer than poem; an inspiring and tender address to our Lady, in which poetic imagination and Catholic devotion are harmoniously blended.

Though Chaucer of course was not writing as a theologian, we can learn much from this poem of the state of devotion to our Blessed Lady in England at that period. And in the 'A.B.C.' we find many familiar and well-loved aspects of devotion to the Mother of God: Mary as Co-Redemptrix, as Advocate, as Mediatrix of all graces, the Refuge of Sinners, the All-Immaculate One, crowned Queen of Heaven by God himself.

The poem opens with some noble and tender lines:

'Al myghty and al mercyable Queene,  
To whom that al this world fleeth for socour  
To have relees of sinne, of sorwe, and teene!'

He calls upon Mary to

'Help, and releeve, thou mihti *debonayre*' (=most meek one)

He expresses the ground of his confidence; Mary is so good:

'Bountee so fix hath in thyn herte his tente,  
That wel I wot, thou wolt my socour be'

And he calls upon her as

'Haven of refute, of quiete, and of reste'

His sins, he reflects, which ought not appear in her presence, render him worthy of 'dampnacioun'—if it were not for the mercy of Mary, 'blisful hevenè Queene'. For 'Doute is ther noon that she is 'cause of grace and merci here'; God deigned 'thurgh thee with us to accorde'. Mary is thus the Mediatrix, who averts God's just anger, and 'Thurgh thee han we grace as we desire'.

His past experience teaches him to hope humbly and confidently that at 'the grete assyse' Mary will not fail him before 'the hye justyse'. And he begs her that she 'er that day me wel chastyse'—otherwise his deeds will utterly confound him. Past sin, he confidently says, is no obstacle; he will 'flee for socour' to Mary, though he be 'wikke'. He reminds her with engaging naïvety that it is 'thyn enemy and myn' that is pursuing him; and we think of the Woman whose heel is on the serpent's head, the Immaculate One between whom and the devil is set perpetual enmity.

Then follows a verse so tender in its appeal to Mary, Virgin and Mother, that paraphrase is quite inadequate:

'Glorious mayde and moder which that never  
 Were bitter, neither in erthè nor in see,  
 But ful of swetnesse and of merci ever,  
 Help that my Fader be not wroth with me!  
 Spek thou, for I ne dar not him y-see,  
 So have I doon in erthe, allas the while!  
 That certès, but if thou my socour be  
 To stynk eterne he wol my gost exile!

He begs Mary to remind Christ how his 'precious blood' earned full redemption 'Up-on the crois'. He urges her to pray for us; first, 'to stinte al his (Christ's) grevaunce', and secondly, to 'make our foo to failen of his praye'. Mary's compassion, he knows, goes after the soul that fails and falls: 'Thi pitee goth and haleth him ageyn'; she it is who 'bringest him out of the crooked strete', and well does he realize 'Who-so thee loveth, he shal not love in veyn'.

She is the 'Queen of comfort' to others; yet she is herself the Mother of Sorrows—he cannot fathom her 'sorwè under the cros'. And he feels that she is co-redemptrix with Christ:

'Lat not our alder foo make his bobounce  
 (the foe of us all) (boast)  
 That he hath in his listès of mischaunce

*Cōnvict that ye bothe have bought so dere.'*

(conquer) (what) (i.e. Christ and Mary)

He remembers the burning bush as a type of Mary's 'unwemmed (=undefiled) maidenhede'; and begs her to defend us from hellfire. She is our 'advocat' that 'wol and dar so preye For us, and that for litel hire'. Again he addresses her, the 'noble princesse that never haddest pere'—Seat of Wisdom, Consoler of the afflicted, Help of Christians:

'O verray light of eyen that ben blynde!

O verray *lust* of labour and distresse! (=pleasure)

O tresorere of bountee to mankynde!

She, who 'ne failest never wight at nede', whom God 'ches to moder (chose as mother) for humblesse', has been raised from 'His ancille' to 'maistresse of heven and erthe' precisely—as he says—'our bille up for to bede' (to offer up our petitions).

In her presence he feels himself unworthy; but where can he flee but to 'thysel', that art of pitee welle? A second time, he begs her 'me chastise'—he cannot 'abiden in no wise my Fadres chastisyng'; therefore he turns with confidence to his 'moder and Ladi deere', in whom is 'pitee haboundyng'. He is confident that all graces, especially the grace of forgiveness, come to men through the hands of Mary:

'Soth is that God ne granteth no pitee

Withoutè thee; for God, of his goodnesse,

Forgiveth noon, but it like un-to thee;

God 'represseth his justise After thy wille', wherefore 'He hath thee crownèd in so ryal wise'.

Mary is the 'Temple devout, ther (=where) God hath his wonyng (=dwelling)'; to her, 'so noble of apparaile', who 'ledest us in-to the hye tour Of paradys', he turns, that she may guide and teach him 'How I may have thy grace and thy socour'. He is sincerely sorry that, though 'Christ thi Sone . . . made his hertè blood to renne adoun . . . for my salvacion', he unworthily 'to hym am fals and eek unkynde'; yet confidently he thanks Mary, 'socour of al mankynde', because he knows that, owing to her prayers, Christ 'wol not my dampnacioun'. Isaac he sees as a type of Christ, obedient unto death; and he reminds Mary 'Right soo thy Sone lust as a lamb to deye'. Therefore, he pleads 'Sith (=since) he his mercy mesurèd so large, Be ye not skant . . .' for she the Mother of Christ has 'ben from vengeauncè ay oure targe'. Were

it not for her tender heart, he repeats, 'we weren spilt (=destroyed)'; and he concludes on a quiet but trusting note, begging Mary the 'mercycable' to bring us all safe and sound to our heavenly home.

Any attempt to convey the sincere and childlike devotion of the poem must be inadequate; when we read the whole in its original, it will make its own quiet appeal. 'The fervour of praise and devotion' cannot be more evident. And, out of many points, there is one that is worth meditating. Twice, the poet begs Mary to 'chastise him well' before the day of judgment; for he feels unable to abide his Father's 'rightful reckoning'. Surely this trustful turning to Mary, this confiding to her, as to a loving and wise mother, the charge of our correction, can become an integral part of our own devotion to the Mother of God.



## OUR LADY IN THE SCRIPTURES

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**F**ROM early childhood the Catholic is taught to realize something of our Lady's place in God's designs, and in course of time comes to learn that he who 'suffered under Pontius Pilate' was 'born of the Virgin Mary'. So much for traditional Catholic teaching.

Now let us turn to the Church's Sacred Book and consider the doctrine of our Lady as it can be found there. Having looked more carefully, we shall be rewarded by knowing more about *her*, and also by knowing and understanding the Scriptures better.

The last hundred years (1854-1954) have been a high-point in the Church's conscious expression of the doctrine of our Lady, from the definition of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 to this Marian year of 1954. We can contrast the years 1754-1854. There have been very long periods of quiet, when doctrines are humbly taught, tacitly assumed, and the reality lives on, for the Church's teaching never fails.

Let us start by considering the first generations of believers in the Church's infancy. A first catechism seems to have taken the