



*How long will you hesitate?
The Lord is creating something new on earth;
The Woman sets out to find her Husband again.
Jeremiah 31: 22.*

6. On the fringe

One of the earliest descriptions of God in the Bible is found in the Book of Exodus. The words are God's own words, and this is the self-portrait:

*Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion,
slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness; for thousands, maintaining kindness,
forgiving faults, transgressions and sin. (Exodus 34: 6-7)*

This is the God who spoke to Moses as a friend, and who assured him: "*I have seen the misery of my people*". (Ex. 3:7) The first and abiding image God wants us to have is of a God who is always and everywhere compassionate, merciful, forgiving, and tender. This is not to deny the other images of God as warrior, or king, or judge. But it is why so many of the images used in the Scriptures to describe God are images such as the mother giving birth in pain and bonding with the child in joy; the mother embracing her child; the mother eagle hovering over its nest of fledglings. The God who is revealed to us is a God who goes to the utmost limit to ensure that all will be saved. According to the prophet Micah, that mission of gathering from north and south, from east and west, would come to a peak when, as he foretold, "she who is to give birth gives birth". Then, Micah continues, "the remnant of his brothers will come back" (Micah 5). So, Mary shares closely in Jesus' mission to gather the scattered. Jesus himself went about doing good, having nowhere to lay his head, describing himself as the shepherd who leaves the 99 safe sheep to search for the one lost, and drawing close to all those who for one reason or another found themselves on the fringe of life. The mission of Mary to give birth to the Saviour, and the mission of Jesus to gather all the lost who find themselves on the fringes of life, are deeply connected. Both the Gospel of Jesus and the example of those pioneer Marists confront us with two questions: What if the compassion of God, as enfleshed in Mary the mother, disciple and woman of faith, were lived out by men and women acting in the world? And what if we took seriously Jesus' example of leaving the 99 safe sheep for the sake of the one who is lost?