

THE FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION

Revelation 11. 19, 12.. 1-6, 10

Galatians 4. 4-7

Luke 1. 46-55

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary is celebrated in the Church of England not only because of Mary's great importance as an agent of the Incarnation of Christ and her personification of life-long faithfulness, but also because of general agreement concerning Mary amongst the churches of the West, notably Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Throughout the centuries, the Virgin Mary has played an important role in the life and devotion of both churches.

August 15th (the actual day of the Feast, which can be transferred to 8th September) is called the Feast of the Assumption by the Roman Church. It is important, therefore, to consider what the word 'assumption' actually means and involves. Many Catholics would say that Our Lady did not die, but was assumed into heaven because of her purity.¹ Understood in this way, the 'assumption' is imagined to be a transition from earth to heaven, rather like a Marian ascension.

This impression is reinforced by many works of art, which depict Mary as being elevated to heaven by angels, whilst she appears to be very much alive. I would like to suggest that such works of art do not tell the full story. One has only to consult other works of art which show the Assumption of Mary, but also include depictions of her tomb. In these works of art, the tomb of Mary is empty; and the inference is that she did indeed die.

¹ In 1950, Pope Pius XII published the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*; and in it, he stated that Mary's body was incorrupt and was assumed into heaven.

It turns out that the death of Mary has always been the tradition of the Church, both East and West. This tradition can be traced back as far as the fourth century AD, when a document called ‘The Account of St John the Theologian of the Dormition of the Mother of God’ was produced. The word ‘dormition’ literally means ‘falling asleep’, but the term is used to mean a peaceful death.²

According to tradition, three days after the death of Mary, she was not in her sarcophagus; and when the disciples looked in it, they saw that it was full of fragrant flowers. This suggests that what Our Lady experienced was bodily resurrection, a participation in the bodily resurrection of Christ. This bodily resurrection was her ‘Assumption’.

The Assumption of Mary is not part of Anglican doctrine, because it cannot be established by proof in the Holy Scriptures. And yet something very like the Assumption of Mary can be attested in much of our High Anglican devotional poetry and hymnody. For example, the seventeenth-century Bishop Thomas Ken, the author of the *Doxology* (‘Praise God from whom all blessings flow’), has a hymn which is found in our own *New English Hymnal* (182). It is entitled ‘Her Virgin Eyes Saw God Incarnate Born’; and it ends with the following words: ‘Heaven with transcendent joys her entrance graced, /Next to his throne her Son his Mother placed; /And here below, now she’s of heaven possess, /All generations are to call her blest.’

More recently, Austin Farrer, an Oxford don and perhaps the greatest Anglo-Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, wrote these words for meditation in a document entitled *Taking Up*: ‘The bond of the Incarnation is unbreakable, and Mary, dying, is united to her Son. He came from her womb, and she goes into his mystical body; once she was home for him, now he is home to her. She surrenders

² See also *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies* (St. Vladimir’s Press, 1998), especially the writings of St John of Damascus and St Andrew of Crete in this volume.

to him the flesh from which he had his own. He takes up the pieces where she lays them down and remakes her life in the stuff of glory. He cherishes the dear familiar body, entirely her own in every part, and entirely the work of his hands.³

What is said here about Mary is nothing other than the inheritance promised to us all in the Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting, as we attest in the Apostles' Creed. Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that assumptions (or 'translations') of God's special servants into glory are not unknown in the Bible. In Genesis, Enoch, the father of old Methuselah, walked with God after Methuselah's birth for three hundred years and then 'he was no more, for God took him'.⁴ We are more familiar with the story of the death and disappearance of Moses on Mount Nebo after the Lord showed him the Promised Land; and also the Assumption of the prophet Elijah in the whirlwind and chariot of fire.⁵ It is not a long stretch, nor is it an illegitimate development to imagine Our Lady as part of that mystery within the Body of Christ her Son.⁶

So where are we in all this? Well, one of our favourite hymns, 'Ye watchers and ye holy ones' (*NEH* 478), which we sing on feast days such as All Saints, places us firmly in this tradition celebrating Mary's high place in heaven. Listen to the stanza about Our Lady, who is spoken of as the Agent of our salvation by Christ: 'O higher than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim, lead their praises, Alleluya! Thou Bearer of the eternal Word, most gracious, magnify the Lord, Alleluya!'

In today's gospel passage, Mary sings the *Magnificat*, the great canticle used at Evensong. She says, 'Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for

³ Cf. Meditations for the Rosary in 'The Heaven-sent Aid' in *Lord, I believe*, by Austin Farrer and printed in *Saint Thomas's Devotions to our Lady and Stations of the Cross* (Our Lady of Fifth Avenue Ward, Society of Mary), p. 71.

⁴ Cf Gen 5. 24; Heb 11. 5.

⁵ Gen 5. 21-24; Deut 34. 1-8; 2 Kgs 2. 1-12.

⁶ The Continental Protestant leaders of the sixteenth century, Calvin, Luther and Zwingli, were not averse to using some high words about Mary. Zwingli used the 'Hail Mary' in the public devotions of Zurich.

the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name'. That was at the very beginning, when Mary was pregnant with Christ. Now let us go to the end of St John's gospel, where Mary and the Beloved Disciple John are at the foot of the cross. Jesus, in one of his last words, commends them to each other. 'Woman', he says to Mary, 'here is your son' (There is a double meaning in this verse; Christ is referring not only to himself but also to the Beloved Disciple as her son). Then to John he says, 'Here is your mother'. And from that hour, that disciple took Mary into his own home. Very early tradition beyond Scripture says that John took Mary with him to Ephesus; and that they both died natural deaths, young John living to the end of the first century and witnessing Mary's departure some time before.

You and I can do what John did. The word of Jesus from the cross is intended as a word to all of his beloved disciples. This generation can call Mary blessed, and we can take Mary into our own homes. Perhaps you might consider adding the *Hail Mary* to your own prayers:

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.