

THE SOLEMNITY 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.

Today we are celebrating the solemnity¹ (i.e. a celebration of the greatest importance) of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary: the raising of Our Lady, body and soul, at the end of her earthly life, to be with her Son in heaven. It is easy to misunderstand the sense of the word ‘assumption’. We could think along the lines that, since Mary was such a great saint, we ‘assume’ that she is heaven. That is not quite right, however. The ‘assumption’ is not on our part, but on God’s part. It is not we who make the assumption; it is God who makes the assumption. So perhaps the sense is better understood if we think of God ‘lifting’ Mary into heaven: a slightly different sense of the word ‘assumption’ than the one we often use.

This tendency to be misunderstood is perhaps one of the reasons why the feast lends itself to controversy. In addition, the controversy is also fuelled by the Assumption’s apparent lack of scriptural foundation and its comparatively recent declaration as an official dogma of the Church in 1950.

The scriptural reference points are certainly scant. The gospel reading at Mass for today’s feast describes Mary’s visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth and specifically the words of her hymn of praise, the *Magnificat*. These verses are the scriptural foundation for another Marian feast, the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We

¹ Solemnities are the celebrations of greatest importance. Each Solemnity begins on the prior evening with first vespers (evening prayer) and several of the solemnities have their own Vigil Mass. On these days, both the Gloria and the Creed are recited. Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation (the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God, Ascension, Assumption, All Saints, Immaculate Conception and Christmas) are always considered solemnities. Other examples of solemnities include the Solemnity of St Joseph (March 19), the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Friday after the Feast of Corpus Christi), and the Solemnity of St Peter and St Paul (June 29).

use the Visitation reading today, because there is nothing in the gospels that describes the Assumption in the way that the Visitation is described. Historically, other scriptures (including our appointed New Testament reading from Revelation) have been cited as referring to the Blessed Virgin being taken into heaven:² but if you look at them carefully (and we will not take the time to do so this morning) they hardly amount to an explicit dogma of the Assumption. On their own, they are not a ringing endorsement of the doctrine.

It will be no surprise, then, that for those who consider the Bible to be paramount, and for those who will say nothing without clear biblical justification, the doctrine of the Assumption is not easily received. Tradition, however, is what we should turn to. Considered together, tradition and scripture place the dogma of the Assumption on firm foundations.

First of all, we should not be deterred by the fact that the Assumption was only declared as official dogma in 1950. Belief in, and the practice of this doctrine were not first conceived in 1950. The official declaration in 1950 was actually the culmination of long-held beliefs and practices. In England, pre-Reformation art in York Minster depicts the Assumption. There are multiple apocryphal (that is, non-canonical) accounts of belief in the Assumption dating back to at least the 4th century. And St John Damascene writes that the Virgin's empty tomb was attested to at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.³ Pope Leo IV confirmed the feast of the Assumption in the 9th century, but it had already been celebrated for centuries.

The Assumption was clearly supported by important Church people across a wide area from just after the time in which the books of the Bible were written. It may

² For example: Gen 3. 15, Ps 132. 8, Rev 12. 1-2.

³ At the Council of Chalcedon, the Emperor Marcian and his wife Pulcheria asked (as such persons are wont to do) for the remains of the Virgin Mary. When her tomb was opened, the Bishop of Jerusalem told them that it was found to be empty.

even be that the writers of the gospels were aware of the doctrine, but simply didn't express it explicitly in their writings. It is certainly the case that the Assumption complements what is found in the Bible, and does not contradict it.

When the dogma of the Assumption was declared in 1950, the text stated, 'The...Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory'.

That is to say, on completing the course of her earthly life (and the text deliberately makes it possible to conclude that Mary died a physical death), Mary was immediately taken into a new relation to God. Again, to quote the text of the dogma, 'It seems impossible that she who conceived Christ, bore him, fed him with her milk, held him in her arms and pressed him to her bosom, should after this earthly life be separated from him in either body or soul'.

The idea that a woman might be 'assumed body and soul into heavenly glory' did not drop down from the sky. On the contrary, there was significant biblical precedent. Enoch, we will remember, was 'taken' by God (Genesis 5. 24). Elijah 'went up by a whirlwind into heaven' (2 Kings 2. 11-12). Late first-century Jewish writings attributed 'ascents into heaven' to a number of holy men, including Adam, Abraham, Levi, Ezra, Baruch and Isaiah. The fact that the place of Moses's grave was unknown (Deuteronomy 34. 5-6) was taken by some to mean that he too had been translated bodily into heaven.

So the concept of a person's being taken up into heaven existed long before Christianity, not to mention before Catholic and Orthodox beliefs about the Blessed Virgin Mary began to flourish. You may think that such claims are pious legends, or purely fictitious. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary is obviously

trying to say something about the eternal destiny of certain individuals (and particularly Mary) who played significant roles in the history of salvation.

In today's gospel we have a description of a very special moment in the life of Mary. She knows that she is carrying within her own body the Son of God, the Messiah. Her cousin Elizabeth, upon seeing her, is filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaims, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb'. In her own song of praise, Mary predicts that 'surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.'

Yes, Mary is blessed, and she will live a blessed life to which the Assumption is an appropriate end, and perhaps the only logical conclusion. It makes sense that she should be assumed into heaven. It is only proper that at the end of her earthly life, she should be raised to heaven to share in her Son's victory.

The Assumption of Mary is an 'assumption' that is on offer to the entire human race. Our Lord tells us that he has gone to prepare a place for us. You and I shall go to join the Blessed Virgin Mary to celebrate the greatest promise of Jesus: the promise of eternal life, beginning in the here and now, but perfected after death.

Amen.