

On the Feast of the Assumption of the BVM

It is morning, but we've just heard the Magnificat, which is part of the Church's evening office daily throughout the world, continuously offered across time zones in religious communities, countless church services and private offices. Possibly (probably) the most varied and splendid choral settings of it are Anglican.

The Magnificat recognises the wonderful works of God with thanksgiving for them, in the mouth of Mary who was so uniquely favoured. It owes similarity to the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel Ch. 2, also an outpouring of thanksgiving for the gracious gift of a coming child (the great prophet Samuel here.) It's one of those links of inspiration. But Mary is not called the second Hannah, but the second Eve, - Eve the mother of all things living, as named in Genesis. As ancient theology had it, Eve bore responsibility for the Fall, the expulsion of humans from blessedness. But Mary, in her obedience to God's will, is responsible for the enabling the coming of Christ to redeem the world from its fallen state. As the mediaeval carol puts it:

Ne had the appil taken been, the appil taken been,
Ne had never Our Lady a-been hevne quene.

Queen of Heaven is indeed one of Mary's titles, and that is very relevant to today's feast of the Assumption. That Mary was taken up into heaven, 'assumed' at the end of her life, was a doctrine proclaimed and widely known by the end of the 7th Cent., though the Eastern Church was less precise about it than the Western. But Christendom has kept this feast for at least 1300 years.

In our 1662 Book of Common Prayer, two feasts of the Virgin Mary are Red Letter Days with special readings - her Purification on 2nd February (Candlemas) and the Annunciation to her on 25th March (Lady Day). The BCP calendar also acknowledges her Visitation to Elizabeth (from which today's Gospel comes) her Nativity, and her Conception, besides mentioning her mother Anne. You'll notice that doesn't include the Assumption on 15th August, now again kept in CW as her major feast day, though it had disappeared in 1549, in the 1st Prayer Book of King Edward VI.

Whereas we know, and celebrate the dates of death for most of the saints and holy ones, no-one knows the date of Mary's passing, nor is there a reliable tradition of a burial place (though there are rival claims). In the 8th Cent. St. John Damascene wrote that 'she was not left in earth'. So, no grave to honour or at which to pray, no holy place for her who uniquely bore the Word made Flesh, - made of her flesh. No-one could ever be closer to him than she,

she chosen by God for this stupendous event. Many believe she was prepared for this from her own very beginning.

Our Book of Common Prayer came well after the upheaval of the Reformation. When by the 16th Cent. there was wide availability of printed books (Bibles) and new scholarship, the Reformers could read in their own language the commandment condemning graven images. All statues, carvings and much art had to go. It was hacked and burned, and much of it represented Our Lady the Blessed Virgin. More churches were dedicated in her name than in any other, and churches were beautified with works of art. Well, nowadays we have again all kinds of art in churches, images in paint and wood and stone, which still no-one thinks of actually worshipping. These are reminders, assisting devotion for the glory of God. Mary herself is never worshipped, even by Roman Catholics, but has always pointed to her Son.

As the 4th Cent. Church, through much debate and controversy, worked out the Christology we have, it became expressed in the Nicene Creed that our Lord Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man. Mary became defined (in the Council of Ephesus in 431) as God-bearer, Theotokos in Greek. While not herself an apostle martyr, she was placed above them, and it was believed that her flesh could not see corruption. She who had been sought out, prepared, to be Mother of God, even bride of the Holy One, would surely be expected, when the time came, to be welcomed to a very high place in heaven. There are elaborate accounts, from different countries, of how the apostles were summoned to her bedside, and the Lord himself appeared from heaven to escort her on high. (Bishop Thomas Ken's hymn gives this.) It's also found in ikons. As our Lord had ascended into heaven, so she too in her purity could ascend. This does perpetuate a literal understanding of the Ascension, as often portrayed in Art. In the Gospel of John, Jesus does tell the disciples he will return and take them with him. And I've heard anecdotes of the dying perceiving his appearing.

It was as late as 1950 that the Pope (Pius XII) decreed that 'when the course of her life was run, Our Lady the Blessed Virgin was assumed in body and soul into the heavenly glory.' Many think this an unnecessary pronouncement for something always approximately believed, though perhaps not literally. The Orthodox Churches only speak of the Falling Asleep, or Dormition of the Blessed Virgin, but also accord her the highest honour. Their arguments are different. Logical arguments can never present the whole of the faith; we come much nearer to it in imagery and poetry, conveying the sense of glory.

Today's first reading gives some of this; to be clothed with new garments represents the person, to be fit for something great. For a wedding feast there

is exceptional adornment; the heavenly banquet is described as the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, whose bride is the Church. Jacqui Parkinson's wonderful panels of the Book of Revelation, there in the south aisle, show a woman, a literal bride. The book also speaks of the heavenly Jerusalem, sometimes seen as bride or mother too. The earthly Jerusalem is a far cry from that; similarly, the young Galilaean woman Mary is a reality of the past, but becomes metaphorically a personage of all time, through her motherhood of the eternal Lord. From the Magnificat: 'All generations shall call me blessed, for he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his name.'

All denominations too, call her holy; the ARCIC agreed document on her calls her a sign of grace and hope. She is now much more a focus of unity. But - lots of misconceptions abound. I was told a little story by a past President of the Free Church Council: Two callow young Methodists coming away from a conference were talking. One said 'Well, I never knew that! I never realised that Jesus was a Jew!' And the other one said: 'Strange, isn't it, when you think his mother was a Roman Catholic!'

Now Mary also represents the Church, (the whole Church), as the first of a countless host to know and believe in the Lord Jesus. We might call her the first fruits, gone ahead to the heavenly presence, we simply following on. Also, as Jesus came as one of us, even called our brother ('in a stable born our brother') so Mary is our mother too. She's especially been the patron of sailors, who've met the dangers of the deep. In our language we have a great number of phrases and names connected with Mary; she's associated with several holy wells. I used to be a chaplain in a hospital called Ladywell.

It's always been thought Mary can intercede for us, particularly when Christ was mostly thought of as Judge in Majesty. She always listens, never judges. In discounting Mary, some people lose a gentler side of faith, while they should not forget she is a vital key to the Incarnation. It is right she has this day of full honour and recognition, just as the Church believes Our Lord gave her, first and last.

Finally, here is a beautiful poetic statement that puts all in perspective:

Mary the Dawn, but Christ the perfect Day
Mary the Gate, but Christ the heavenly Way
Mary the Root, but Christ the mystic Vine
Mary the Grape, but Christ the sacred Wine
Mary the Fount, but Christ the cleansing Flood
Mary the Chalice, but Christ the saving Blood
Mary the Beacon, but Christ the Haven's rest

Mary the Mirror, but Christ the Vision blest. (Anon)

And I would add: Mary the First Fruits, and God's people Harvest Home.

The Revd Marianne Atkinson