



Fr Paul's Homily

16th August 2009

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The weather has not been good enough in Hampshire this week to catch a glimpse of the Perseid shooting stars. Lots of people have been gazing in the hope of seeing one of these signs in the heavens.



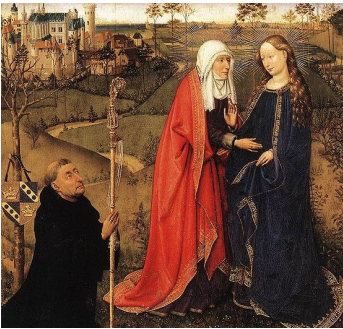
Today our reading from the Apocalypse, or Book of Revelation, offers us a great sign appearing in the heavens which is fantastic, frightening and only to be seen in our imaginations. Many images of Mary the Lord's mother will show her with the moon beneath her feet and twelve stars appearing as a crown. Yes, we think of Mary as we hear that reading on her feast of Assumption but the image stands for another bride that is giving birth, a bride that models herself on the mother of Jesus.



That bride is the Church and just as the woman is portrayed as being in labour so is the Church of which we are members. In many places and for a long time in our traditions fonts have been shaped like wombs because baptism is the act of giving birth to Christ in the lives of his faithful. I would like to quote from Pope Leo the Great who puts it very beautifully "Christ placed in the baptismal font the source of his origin in the womb of the Virgin: the power of the most high and the overshadowing of the water to give birth to the believer." (Leo the Great, Tractatus – In Nativitate Domini.) There is also a prayer from the Mozarabic liturgy that expresses the same truth "Mary carried life in her womb; the Church, in the baptismal font. In the body of Mary Christ put on flesh; in the waters of the Church the baptised put on Christ" (The Mozarabic Liturgy)

On this beautiful feast of Mary we honour her as our model. Just as she gave birth to the Word and Son of God, giving him flesh and blood so that he could be seen and heard by all, so we do the same. Reborn in the womb of the font, it is our baptismal task to make Christ's love and Spirit visible and active in our daily lives. In no other way can we be effective Christians. We are filled with the Holy Spirit so that our lives may bring to those around us the presence and healing power of Christ as Mary did so perfectly.

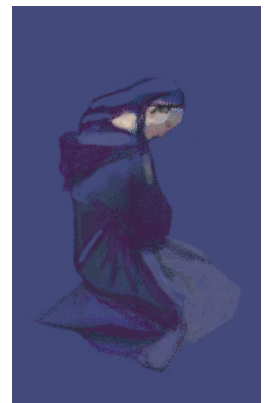
It is a great and beautiful responsibility we have and Mary had the same. She acknowledges it when she says that “the Almighty has done great things for me”. Like each of us Mary had an indispensable part to play in the story of salvation and we are invited to model her faith response to God.



Elizabeth greets Mary and then says some remarkable words: “Of all women you are the most blessed”. In her greeting Elizabeth recognises that Mary is especially favoured by God. And that favour is about true freedom. All of us believe in God, which is why we are here and all of us need God. Like Mary we will be able to see quite clearly the presence and action of God in our lives. But how often does fear and doubt overcome us and inhibit our freedom and trust in God? How often do we seek life and joy in our own power, strength or ability to control of buys things to make us feel better. And such an approach will not make us better or happy because we know that only God can do that for us. We are created for him. We fool ourselves if we think that freedom is failing to respond to God. Freedom can only be found in prayer and a living relationship with Christ.

Mary was blessed and favoured because her freedom and love for God was not restricted by selfishness, fear or that wicked ability that we all have to rely completely on ourselves at the expense of God. In faith and prayer Mary was blessed because she was able to respond whole heartedly to God. She was completely open to him.

The key moment in her life was when she experienced an angel in prayer. She was a young girl, probably a teenager, acutely aware of her femininity and her potential as a mother and woman. The angel’s message was that she had been chosen to become the mother of the Son of God, without a man, the conception was entirely between her and the Spirit of God. Her response teaches us so much. It was a complete and utter yes with no ‘what ifs’. “Use me” she said to God “I put my whole life at the service of his purpose”. “Let it be done to me according to your word”. It was in prayer, with complete faith, hope and love that she became the mother of God.



Mary became the mother of Jesus in faith; hers was the most supreme act of faith in human history. That is why Elizabeth called her the “most blessed”. During every moment of her life the Spirit of God had kept her free from that tendency to turn away from God prompted by fear and selfishness, all those things we call sin. Through the gift of God she was perfectly at one with him, listening to his word and living her life completely in tune with the same Word of God who became here son. Her life was a complete and positive response to God’s love and because the resistance of sin was not in her, the end of her life brought her to that full share in the resurrection. Everything she was and had

become in her journey of faith was brought into the life of God through the Holy Spirit and the power of resurrection.

Unlike Mary our own response to God lacks the freedom she experienced because of that tendency in all of us to turn away from God and fail in that whole hearted response which was hers. Before we can rise with Christ into the life of God we must change and be able to say with Mary “Be it done unto me according to your Word”.



Mary’s assumption into heaven, without the experience of the embrace of death, brings an invitation to live our lives in tune with her son who is the Word of God. Like her we are called to listen to him speak in our hearts through prayer; like her all our thoughts, actions and responses are to be shaped and informed by the Word who brings life; like her our response to God must always be a whole hearted yes, never failing in the trust that puts our life and service into his hands.

Mary is offered to us today as a sign of assurance and consolation as we make our pilgrimage through life because at her death she was taken up into heaven to be the beginning and the likeness of the Church in its fullness and perfection. Where she has gone we hope to follow.