

## Feast of the Assumption (Solemnity of)

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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(and addressing virtually from)

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*Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. 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. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." - Luke 1:46-55*

This is, in fact, the second time that I've been asked to share a word with my brothers and sisters across the Atlantic, in spite of not actually being able to be there. And as I said then I'll say now: I'm put in mind of the words of the apostle Paul to Timothy: 'I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy'. And then of course, the words in the opening chapter of his epistle to the Romans: 'I'm longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, or rather that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith'. And indeed, I'm glad that I don't really have to say those words with Paul, because indeed we can be together this morning and encourage each other in the faith. What I will say though, is that Zoom is an ambiguous gift. For had Paul had Zoom, there would have been no Letter to the Romans and certainly no Letter to Timothy. And I think we'd all agree that we'd be worse off for that.

But the last time I preached at the church of the Ascension was in 2018 for the feast of Corpus Christi. And although this is only the second time that I have been with you as a preacher, I'm beginning to see a pattern emerge. And I wonder if I should be worried that I seem to get a tap on the shoulder whenever one of those weird Catholic 'big C' doctrinal feasts comes around. Maybe the hope is that the English accent will fill what would otherwise be a rather awkward silence, a bit like elevator music. Or maybe the hope is even less realistic, namely, that I might actually have something useful to say...but I'm going to have a go anyway.

As with Corpus Christi, so with the Assumption, or the Dormition or the Feast of the blessed Virgin Mary, whatever you want to call it, the same urgent question, looms large: What's the point? Why are we talking about this? And this seems particularly pertinent now. Why is a congregation in Chicago's Gold Coast neighbourhood taking time to talk about a woman who lived in Palestine over two millennia ago, and especially to talk about whether or not she did in fact die and whether or not, either after her death or instead of her death, she was taken up to a place called heaven in the flesh. It seems a bit mad. And to some, maybe even this congregation, it may seem worse. It may seem irresponsible. Your city, your country, my country, indeed the world stands in need of the Church, of the revelation of God, in justice, in mercy and in love to a degree that for many of us is unprecedented in our lifetimes. So why are you here listening to me talk about Mary when there is so much to do?

It is helpful here to hear the words of a wonderful Irish, Dominican theologian, who began a sermon for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which is yet another obscure, disputed Marian feast with this observation: 'we do not have feasts of doctrines. We simply celebrate the gift of God, where it is to be found, in people'. The Feast of the Assumption is, I would suggest, not a feast of doctrine, but a feast in which we remind ourselves, maybe learn for the first time, celebrate and give thanks for the ambition that God has for us as his children. It is an opportunity for us to align our view of ourselves, of the world and of our future with the view and the will that God has for us and our world and our future. At a time of such widespread mutual distrust and hostility, fear for the health of the earth and her people, and despair of a future that seems filled only with foreboding, I think we would do well to take this feast and the figure of Mary seriously.

Doctrine is always about the solidarity of God with creation. Doctrinal disputes, doctrinal formulae, the *Creed*, no matter how apparently obscure, outdated, nonsensical and irrelevant, they may appear, always have at their heart the affirmation of God's total, unreserved solidarity with his world, his refusal to spare any expense, as it were, in his desire to be with us and to share his life with us. This is what, for example, Corpus Christi is about. And we have in the Office for Corpus Christi, written by St. Thomas Aquinas, the words of Deuteronomy: 'what other nation is so great as to have their gods near to them in the way the Lord our God is near to us whenever we pray to him?' This doctrine is about the nearness of God to his people. This is what the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are all about. The affirmation of Christ as fully God and fully man is entirely about affirming that God holds nothing back in his life with us. And this is why the early church also insisted that Mary be known as the Theotokos or the Deipara in Latin, the 'God Bearer' or 'Mother of God'. Because what we affirm in saying that Mary was the mother of God, is that Jesus was very God and very man.

A high veneration for Mary is then in some respects, nothing other than a higher veneration for for the person of Christ, for the solidarity of Christ with creation. But we, particularly in the Catholic tradition, want to say something slightly different about Mary. We want to talk not just about God's solidarity with us, but we talk, we insist on talking – in ways that trouble our brothers and sisters in the Reformed tradition – about Mary's solidarity with us, her care for us, her involvement in our lives, in our joys, our longing and our suffering. And so we have to ask the question: on what basis do we do this? Because there doesn't seem, and I use the word *seem*, to be much in scripture to justify this. But let us look closer, and we will actually find in the scriptural details that we do have about Mary, that she stands for the whole of God's people.

There is, first, the notion that Mary is the fulfillment of the whole history of Israel. Mary is Israel. And this we get in that uncomfortable, slightly difficult aspect of the church's doctrine about Mary, which is that she was a virgin. Now I would like to suggest that Mary's virginity isn't about how morally pure (understood in a prudish sense) she was, as much as it is an emphasis on Mary's being set apart. It is about Mary's holiness. And of course we are reminded of Israel as the bride of God, as the virgin people of God, as the people called to be set apart as Mary is, within a history of striving for holiness. And that's what the Orthodox tradition really insists on. It insists on the idea that Mary's father and mother were themselves pious members of the priestly caste and that in them, and then in Mary, all of the striving of Israel to be this people set apart, comes to its fulfillment.

So that's the first scriptural detail that allows us to say no, there is something special about Mary, something that means she's with us in a particular way, as an integral of God's people. And then there's the Magnificat, which we heard as the Gospel this morning. And we'll come back to that. But again, what we get there is this longing, this historical longing of Israel for the justice of God to be done. We heard in Morning Prayer the Song of Hannah, which has such obvious textual resonances with the song of Mary. And I'm going to talk a little bit later about the song of Miriam. But again, we get this sense that Mary, in those words that we have of hers, does not just speak as herself. That those words, indeed, the words of the Annunciation are not hers alone in that moment, but that a whole life and a whole history speaks when she says, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord'. But I want to draw attention to a less explicit, often less-observed parallel between Mary and not a matriarch, but a patriarch. And that patriarch is Abraham.

We don't often think about Mary as in some way standing alongside Abraham. We often think about her standing alongside Eve and as going further than Eve could do, and thus as fulfilling Eve's vocation. But what about Abraham? Well, we of course have the miraculous birth. The child promised to Mary is the child promised to Sarah, promised in implausible, impossible circumstances. But there is also the sacrifice of the son. The fact that both Abraham and Mary, having received this child - whom they are promised will be the fulfillment of their longing, their families, their houses, their people - have to give him up in the most horrendous of circumstances. There is the summons to Abraham to himself kill his son. And then there is Mary looking on, as she sees the son whom she was told would redeem her people Israel, hung to die in a disused quarry, his body already just disfigured, his death a cause of celebration among a religious hierarchy that viewed him as a nuisance and a criminal. And Mary here is taken further than Abraham actually had to go, because the angel of the Lord did indeed stay the hand of Abraham; that angel did not stay the hand of Christ's executioners. So Mary is here called to fulfil that sacrifice for things unseen that is prefigured and anticipated in the striving of all of the patriarchs.

And here at the foot of the Cross, Mary does not just join in herself all of Israel's history, but she joins our present in herself too. For the grief of Mary, her bewilderment is ours, surely especially so at this moment in our history. I would like to quote here the words of a German Roman Catholic theologian, who writes: 'more and more, she "understood not" what he meant - when he stayed behind in the temple without telling her, when he failed to receive her, when, in his public life, he concealed in power and spent himself in vain, and, in the end, detached himself from her as she stood at the foot of the Cross, substituting for himself a stranger, John, to be her son' (Hans ur von Balthasar). Her bewilderment that the fulfillment of God's promise to her should look like this is ours. Can this really be the will of God for his creation? And her anger, surely her anger, as she watched her son treated with such rank cruelty and impossible injustice, is the anger of mothers the world over, but perhaps particularly in the United States, who are crying for justice as beloved children are stolen, criminalized, imprisoned and murdered. So Mary speaks for all of Israel and stands at the foot of the Cross for all of us.

And I think it's worth expressing here my discomfort with the image of Mary as meek and mild. What kind of spirit was it that overshadowed her? It was the one that descended in tongues of fire on the apostles, that inspired the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, that moved Miriam, when she sang in jubilation, as the chariots of Pharaoh were submerged in the sea. It is the spirit that led Mary to sing the Magnificat, a song of triumph, a song of victory; emphatically not the song of a wallflower or a shrinking violet.

And here, in this song of victory, Mary is not just in solidarity with us as we are, in our groaning and in our longing, but she is in solidarity with us as we will be. The words 'I can't breathe' are familiar to all of us as the words of George Floyd and others for whom those words have become a rallying cry. They are familiar to us as a result of government neglect as people continue to be unable to breathe as a result of COVID-19. And we should think about the fact that as the world cries out, 'I can't breathe', Mary sings. God's promise to us is not just to be alongside us in solidarity, sharing our grief and our frustrations, nor is it simply to 'make it better' one day. His promise, that we here in Mary's song, is to totally transform us, to make us entirely in new, to put a new song in our mouth, to bring us into a *new* heaven and a *new* earth. And again, I will quote that same Irish Dominican: 'Our redemption will not just be the successful end of a journey, the triumphant culmination of a history, but in some utterly mysterious way, we will be freed from our history' (Herbert McCabe).

It is this radical break with our history that the doctrine of the Assumption insists on. In the Assumption, the teaching that Mary was raised bodily into heaven after her death and according to which Mary lives now the life of freedom that we will all live in the Kingdom, in that doctrine, we are given a picture of God's promise to us. And so what are we to do? Again, let us turn to the Cross and to the words of Christ to the beloved disciple: 'This is your mother'. The beloved disciple stands for us the Church, and we are called each and every one of us to receive Mary into our homes and to learn from her what it means to be a disciple. And as we make our spiritual communion now, let us pray that just as Mary received the Son of God into her body, we too may receive the Son of God into our bodies and become God-bearing. May the song of Mary be ours: 'He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away'.

*Amen.*