

## SERMON/REFLECTIONS FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION (tr.) 16 AUGUST 2020

Devotion to Our Lady has generally been more a Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox thing than a practice of the Church of England. There are exceptions of course, of which the lively part Walsingham plays in the life of all the churches is a good example. And I think there has been a move away from some incorrect and unhealthy teachings about Mary, suggesting that she is more sympathetic than her Son, for instance.

There is information about Mary in the gospels and in the book of Acts where she is described as being at prayer with other disciples, including some women. Mary is an historical figure. In one of his letters S. Paul describes Jesus as being 'born of a woman, born under the law' (Galatians 4.4).

The assumption of Mary is not in the Bible. We have to think of Mary as a symbolic as well as an historical figure. And that is actually a very biblical approach. The prophets gave God's message to the Israelite people of their day, but they sometimes addressed the nation by the name of the patriarchs and their wives: Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel. Israelites were represented by the figures of Abraham and the rest. Not only people, but places could have symbolic meanings. Jerusalem was portrayed as the mother of God's people (Isaiah 66.10,11).

The book of Revelation is full of symbols. Today's reading features a woman giving birth, her child, a dragon and the wilderness. The child is identified as the Messiah, Christ. The dragon is identified as the devil, Satan. The most direct understanding of the woman is that she represents Israel, the people from whom Christ sprang. It's a straightforward step from there to see a link with Mary, along S. Paul's lines – Jesus was born of a woman, born under the law. Jesus was an Israelite because his mother was. He belonged to the people defined by receiving the law of Moses.

It's also likely that the woman represents the new Israel, the Christian community, the church. For S. John the Divine, the writer of the book of Revelation, there was one people of God through the ages, first Israel and then the church. It is the church which now brings Christ into the world. Christ came into the world by being born of Mary. She is called the Mother of the Church, which is in accordance with Jesus' words on the cross making her the mother of the beloved disciple.

I'm sorry if this is complicated. Putting it simply, the picture of the woman in the passage from Revelation stands for the people of God, Israel and the church, and therefore can be linked to Mary who was both an Israelite and a special member of the church.

I haven't yet said what the assumption is. It's 'assumption' in the sense of 'taking up'. Anglicans aren't required to believe anything in particular about the assumption. The Roman Catholic teaching is that at the end of her earthly life Mary was taken body and soul into heaven. It leaves open the question of whether she had a natural human death, or was whisked away in a similar manner to Elijah, who was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven. The Orthodox do not use the term 'assumption', but talk about the *dormition*, the falling asleep of Mary.

The important word in the teaching is 'body'. I've said in a sermon recently that life in heaven will probably be more similar to our present life in this created world than is commonly imagined. People often think of heaven as a place where people's spirits dwell. That is a watering down of Christian teaching. In S. Paul's letters, and elsewhere, it is taught that we are to have a body of the resurrection. Some have thought our original earthly bodies will be reconstituted, but it could be a completely new body, created and bestowed by God. No plastic surgery necessary. We shall also be living in a renewed creation. If you think about it, it is through our bodies that we relate to each other. When I speak I am making vibrations in the air which your ear collects and your brain interprets. It's difficult to conceive how disembodied spirits could relate and communicate. Heavenly telepathy?

We may find it more helpful to think in terms of 'fullness of person' or 'fullness of humanity' rather than make the body/soul distinction. Whichever way suits us, in thinking of the mystery of our destiny beyond this world, we have to use pictures and symbols. No other language is possible. We are celebrating our glorious destiny – eternal life – with the picture of a unique saint, the mother of the Son of God, joining him in the fullness of resurrection. There are similarities between the assumption of Mary and the ascension of Christ – both are about humanity entering heaven – but Mary, like us, is human, not both human and divine. We are Christ's brothers and sisters; we are Mary's children. Where they are we shall one day be. Let's say the Hail Marys and get out the champagne!