

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ASSUMPTION OF THE BVM 15 AUGUST 2021

About 25 years ago, on summer holiday in Devon, I went with my elder son Richard to a Roman Catholic church on the feast of the Assumption. One of the monks from Buckfast Abbey was presiding and preaching at the mass. I remember thinking what an excellent sermon it was. I wish I could remember what he said.

Christians have speculated about the end of Mary's life from very early times. Only in 1950 did the Roman Catholic define the doctrine of the Assumption officially: that when her earthly life was completed, Mary was taken body and soul into heaven. This leaves open the possibility that Mary died a natural human death before anything else happened to her. Assumption has the meaning of 'taking up': rather as we say you 'assume the mantle' of your predecessor. Roman Catholics are expected to accept their church's teaching.

Mary is an important figure for the eastern Orthodox group of churches, but they don't talk about her assumption. Instead they have a feast of the Dormition of Mary, which means her 'falling asleep'. Think of the word dormant.

There is no official Anglican teaching about the end of Mary's life, and the Church of England is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Anglicans are free to believe in the Assumption, or not believe in it, or to have no opinion on the matter.

Objections to belief in the Assumption, often raised by Christians of a Protestant persuasion, come from two directions. The first is the general objection that devotion to Mary has developed in harmful ways. Sometimes people think, or thought, that God is stern and unforgiving, but Mary is a loving mother. "Pray to Mary and she'll put in a good word for you." Of course that is not a correct idea of God. After all, God invited Mary to play a crucial part in the salvation of the world: he invited her to be the mother of the Saviour.

The second direction is that there is nothing in the Bible about the end of Mary's life. In a straightforward sense that is true. The last factual statement about her is in the book of Acts. She was at prayer with other followers of Jesus after his crucifixion and resurrection. She was a member of the church.

We can be more discerning as we read scripture. Historical figures are sometimes used in a symbolic way. A good example is Jacob, one of the founding patriarchs of the Jewish people, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham (not forgetting the women Rachel, Rebekah and Sarah). Maybe a thousand years after Jacob's death, the prophet Isaiah addressed the Jewish people under the name 'Jacob'. A founding father stood for the whole people.

Mary can be thought of in this way, and this is in scripture. Look at the rood here in church. It depicts a scene in the fourth gospel only. The beloved disciple and the mother of Jesus stand at the foot of the cross. They're not named in the fourth gospel, which is a hint that what they stand for is more important than historical details. Jesus says to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" To the disciple he says, "Behold, your mother!" In effect, Jesus makes his mother the mother of all who seek to follow Jesus closely, as the unnamed disciple did. Mary is the mother of the church, and stands for the Christian community just as Jacob could stand for the Jewish people.

There is a symbolic figure of a woman in today's first reading from the book of Revelation. On her head is a crown of twelve stars. That should make us think of the twelve tribes of Israel. The woman gives birth to a male child, who is identified as the Messiah. Jesus sprang from the people of Israel, and Mary herself was an Israelite. Symbols work on more than one level.

There is symbolism in today's gospel as well, the *Magnificat* or *The Song of Mary*. What God has done for Mary in choosing her to be the mother of the Saviour is a symbol of his wider purposes: scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts and lifting up the lowly.

Alas, scattering of the proud and lifting up of the lowly is not a general reality in today's world; nor has it ever been. In so many places we see the suffering of the lowly. The church, represented by Mary, is to be a community where God's purposes are lived out as a prophetic witness to the world. In celebrating her assumption we are expressing our conviction that ultimately God's purposes will prevail. We, her children, in the fullness of redeemed humanity, body and soul, will share with her the glory of heaven.