

Readings for the Feast of St Mary the Virgin

13th August 2023

First Reading: Revelation 11:19-12:6

God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.

Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.

And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Second Reading: Galatians 4:4-7

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Gospel: St Luke 1:46-55

Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour 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 for ever.'

A Reflection for the Feast of St Mary

From Rev'd Canon Dr John Cuthbert

Some lines from the Gospel, the words which we recognise as The Magnificat, said or sung each day as part of Evening Prayer:

For he has looked with favour 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.

And sure enough, each generation in turn has indeed referred, and continues to refer to Mary as Blessed - the BVM, the Blessed Virgin Mary. Across the church's year she is remembered on particular days for the important moments when she was involved in God's plan for His Son to enter our realm, to take our nature, as Messiah; and on this day, when the church describes her reward, sometimes referred to the Dormition or Falling Asleep, or alternatively as the Assumption of Our Lady. The origins of this tradition are not known but believed to be quite early in the church, and certainly the tradition is accepted in the writings of some of the 3rd century Church Fathers – that Mary, like Elijah, the major prophet of the Old Testament, alongside Moses, would not see corruption, but be carried directly into Abraham's bosom.

Of course the Bible is silent on the matter, and Paul, whose writings are the earliest, does not mention Mary's name or the Virgin Birth. For Paul, the importance of the Incarnation, is that Jesus was born of woman, born under the law. Jesus' birth was not to be distinguished from any other birth, because his humanity was not to be distinguished from the humanity of those he came to save. And through Jesus' incarnation, his death on the Cross and resurrection, we become joint heirs, not to call Mary 'Mother', but to call God, 'Father', or as Paul puts it, 'Abba'. Abba, that most intimate of titles for one's Father.

It is in the later writings of Matthew's and Luke's gospels that Mary is given some importance as the one chosen by God to be the bearer of His incarnate Son, and who in her life delights in Him and gives Him her devotion. And it is Mary who accepts the suffering she must bear as she receives his rebukes – when he was a child in the temple; at the marriage at Cana; at the time when he seems to reject his family's plea to be with him - and the suffering she must bear as she witnesses his suffering. But the important thing is that she accepts it all. She does not merely resign herself to it. When she gives her reply to God, "Be it unto me according to your word", it is a declaration of positive acceptance, not negative resignation.

A few Sundays ago we heard the parable of the sower and how the seed fell on different kinds of ground, and how those who hear the word of God are the seed falling on good soil bringing forth a multiplication of fruit. Luke, in his Gospel, presents Mary as the first believer, hearing the word of God and accepting and submitting to it, that Jesus, Immanuel, the Word made flesh, might enter into the world. And the young Mary at the beginning of the Gospel, will come to have her own title, Mary the Mother of the Lord, who followed and attended to Jesus through his ministry and particularly through his crucifixion and burial.

So it is natural that the members of the Early Church would take Mary to their hearts and to raise her to a special status. And it is argued that as the Early Church came to understand that Jesus the Son of Mary, was more importantly the Son of God, that the earthly Jesus was the divine Christ, then those early Christians came to emphasise Jesus' divinity, so that they no longer saw Jesus as an intermediary, and so not so accessible. Mary, the Mother of Our Lord

became the obvious candidate as interceder. And in the Revelation of St John the Divine, she is presented as being confronted by the destroyer; and in parallel to Jesus being taken from Mary by the earthly authorities, there the same thing is played out in the supernatural realm.

Mary was attributed the role of human interceder since surely, she who played such an important role in the working out of God's purpose must have already received her reward. Surely, the one so intimately related to Jesus would already have some special place in His kingdom. And surely, her prayers more than anyone's would be heard and answered. Her prayers would be the prayers of the Church offered through her.

But I don't think Mary is there just for us take advantage of any privilege she might have. I think Mary is there to be remembered as Luke presents her as an obedient and accepting servant of God, and in being remembered, to continue to be an example of what it means to be a believer in our own time and our own context.

Are there times when we can say for ourselves: 'For he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. For the Mighty One has done great things for me'?

Can we identify the times when we feel blessed, not by being given some gift from God, but by being trusted by God with some task? Blessed through our obedience in our journey of faith.