

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary 2021

“The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”

The best part of fifty years ago, when I was an ordinand at St Stephen's House, we were required to undertake a pastoral attachment during the Long Vacation. Three of us hit on the idea of spending two weeks in an overseas chaplaincy, little expecting that we would be allowed to do so. To our amazement our plan was approved, and we went off to undertake our attachment in the consulate chaplaincy in Istanbul.

Amongst other activities we had a day's visit to Ephesus. Those of you who have been there will know how fascinating it is to walk through the very well-preserved ruins of the places of which we read in the Acts of the Apostles and to reflect on the early Christian community in that city to whom St Paul wrote.

But it is to my lasting regret that we didn't have enough time in that very short stay to visit perhaps the most important place in the whole region, the place known as “Mary's House”. Popular tradition has it that this was a house built by St John the Apostle for Our Lady, and the place where she lived out the remainder of her earthly life. Lost for centuries, it was rediscovered as a ruin in the 19th century as a result of a vision experienced by a nun (now known as Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich) and rebuilt in its present form in the 20th century, becoming a place of pilgrimage. Its importance was, unsurprisingly, enhanced in 1950 when Pope Pius XII dogmatically defined the Assumption – the feast that we celebrate today. While Rome has never fully affirmed the authenticity of the house, because it relies entirely on popular tradition for its character, it is regarded as a Holy Place by both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and has been visited by Popes and Patriarchs, as well as the millions of pilgrims attracted to it.

If it is indeed the home of Our Lady until the end of her earthly life, then it follows that it must have witnessed the events of that life's close. But what did it witness? What were those events which led to the strong and enduring beliefs of the faithful about her place in Heaven and which culminated in the dogmatic assertion in 1950 that she was assumed, body and soul, into Heaven?

The honest answer is that we do not know. An appeal to Scripture is of little help. The only reference to Mary's place in Heaven is found in the passage from St John the Divine's Revelation that we heard read this morning as our first lesson. It is of a typically lurid nature and, like much of that Book, it is best treated figuratively rather than literally, but it does at the very least indicate that there was a very early belief that Mary is indeed in Heaven. Beyond that, we can only really rely on the tradition that has been handed down.

At its heart the doctrine states that Our Lady was assumed body and soul into Heaven. Unfortunately, this has led to some believing that Mary did not die but was somehow hoovered up just as she was from the place where she was living.

This is, of course, an extremely unsatisfactory position to adopt, not least because by the end of her life Mary was, by the standards of the day, an old lady, and which of us in old age would care for the idea of our increasingly worn-out old body being the one in which we would have to spend all eternity? It is also, and more importantly, theologically implausible. In order to overcome the power of death and to open the way to eternal life Jesus himself had to pass through death and become a new creation, in the resurrection body in which he was himself taken into heaven. His promise to us is not that we shall not die, but rather that after our death we shall be raised to new life. Death and renewal in resurrection is the promised outcome for all of humanity, and it makes no sense to suppose that an exception was made for Mary.

St Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, expressed the view that the transformation of the faithful into the new creation could happen in an instant to those then living, but of course he expected the second coming of Christ to be imminent, and tradition may have assumed that this was what Our Lady experienced. "We shall not all die, but we shall all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet-call." But we now know that the last trumpet-call is yet to come, and that death has been the lot of all humanity. More realistically Paul continues: "The trumpet will sound, and the dead will rise immortal, and we shall be changed. This perishable must be clothed with immortality." And earlier he writes, "The seed you sow does not come to life unless it has first died; What is sown in the earth as a perishable thing is raised imperishable. Sown in humiliation, it is raised in glory;

sown in weakness, it is raised in power; sown as an animal body, it is raised as a spiritual body.” In writing this he picks up the words of Jesus in St John’s Gospel, prefiguring his own death and resurrection: “In truth, in very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest.”

Returning to the end of the life of Our Lady, we may see that like all of humankind she did not escape death, but what sets her apart and makes this feast of the Assumption so important is what then happened. Not only do the majority of humans have to wait after death, sometimes for centuries, to hear that final trumpet call, but the Church has long taught that being raised is followed by being judged, and that in turn is followed by being purified. This has been called Purgatory – a much misused term which in today’s usage suggests pain, suffering, and tooth-gritting endurance. I prefer the lovely portrayal of Purgatory in John Henry Newman’s “Dream of Gerontius” – a gentle and loving washing away of fault and sin welcomed by Gerontius, the old man. “Softly and gently, dearly ransomed soul” says the angel as Gerontius is placed into the water of purification, together with a promise to come and fetch him when the time of cleansing is over.

What sets Our Lady apart is that we are taught that she was taken directly to dwell eternally in the presence of God, without any intervening judgement or cleansing. We know of her life of obedience, love and devotion and of her special place in the Christian story. She alone was present both at the very beginning and at the very end of Jesus’ earthly life. We also learn from the teaching that is the twin to the Assumption – the Immaculate Conception – that she is believed to have been conceived without original sin. Her soul at the time of her death was in the condition of purity and sanctity that ours will achieve only after judgement and cleansing, and so her progress from life, through death, to resurrection and assumption could well have taken place “in the twinkling of an eye”.

What does this mean for us?

In Our Lady we see the promise of new life in God’s eternal presence reinforced, as it were. It is a promise made good for the mother of the Lord, a simple human being, just

like us. Her Son was and is both human and divine, but she is human through and through. Others have followed where she has gone – or so we believe when we speak of the saints in Heaven – but she is the first proof of the truth and faithfulness of God’s promises in Christ.

There is nothing to suggest that in her earthly life Mary ever sought anything for herself. Her whole life was devoted to God through obedience to His will. Many young women would have boasted about the favour that they had been granted by God, but Mary remained “humble and meek”, as the Magnificat has it, and gave all the glory to Almighty God. In this there is a lesson for us all. We regularly, and properly, call Mary “full of grace”, and in so doing we must remember that the grace with which she is filled comes from God. In the Magnificat she says that all generations will call her blessed – and that extraordinary blessing comes from God. The Assumption – taking her, resurrection body and soul, into Heaven – is a gift of love and grace from God - a gift granted to all of us just as much as to Our Lady herself.

While we rejoice at the presence of Our Lady in Heaven to intercede for us, the Feast of the Assumption is a celebration of the grace and love of Almighty God, shown to Mary and through her demonstrated to us – the divine promise made good, the hope held out to us all of everlasting life in His presence.

“The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” We give thanks in our celebration of the Assumption for the promise, fulfilled in Mary, that we shall all be raised to new life. We give thanks for her earthly life of obedience and devotion, which serves as a model for us all. We give thanks that in taking Mary into His eternal presence God gives us one who can intercede continually for us. And in our thanksgiving we give praise and glory to Almighty God, and to Him alone.