

## **The Assumption 2017**

### **13.8.17 Keble College Chapel (Mary Mags)**

Thaxted in Essex is a village remarkable for more than its traditional beauty. It was for some years the weekend home of the composer Gustav Holst, and for that reason it has given its name to one of his most famous tunes, the stately theme from Jupiter, in *The Planets*, known to some through its use in the hymn "I vow to thee my country". Thaxted also features an absolutely glorious medieval parish church, one of the East's many wool churches, built with the profits of medieval farming and trade. In 1910, a man called Conrad Noel became the incumbent, and brought to this well to do Essex village a combination of wonderful Anglo Catholic religion and absolutely uncompromising Christian socialism, so much so that he became known as the red Vicar of Thaxted, and a consistory court had to be convened to order the red Vicar to take down from the church the red flag. Unsurprisingly in rural Essex, the religion outlasted the socialism, and when I was a young curate I attended the Assumptiontide festivities there, an annual gathering to

which the high church clergy of the diocese, bedecked in lace and soaked in gin, would flock for an unapologetic camp fest of Marian devotion. The then Vicar, an old style “father knows best” type, began the service by standing at the front of the nave, announcing that we were gathered in that place to honour Our Lady, and then literally wagging his finger at the congregation as he said “And we honour Our Lady never so much as when we follow the gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ”.

He was right. Our celebration of Mary the Mother of God, is first and foremost a celebration of her Son Jesus Christ. And today, as we proclaim our faith in the resurrection hope to which we are called with Mary and all the saints, we should remind ourselves precisely what the Christian doctrine of the resurrection says to the world. It is easy to be triumphalist about the communion of saints and the heavenly banquet to which Christ invites the people of God. But triumphalism alone is never Christian, because the one who calls us to share in his resurrection is the one who suffered the agony of the crucifixion.

It is for this reason that the Christian tradition developed the image of Our Lady of Sorrows, the devotion to Mary as one who knows the fullest extent of Christian suffering by her intimacy with the son whom she watched give himself to torture and to execution. We can see that the suffering of Mary the exemplar is a suffering which derives from the agony of Christ himself. By focussing on Mary we are not praising her for doing better than us, so much as using her to learn what being a Christian looks like, what it means for you and me genuinely to share in the life of Christ and to bring him to the world.

The song of Mary which we call the magnificat – it is so named from the first word of the song translated into Latin – is one of the greatest of all Christian hymns. As with so many of the songs of scripture, its origins are to be found in texts elsewhere in the Bible, and in particular in this case, in the Song of Hannah from the first book of Samuel. Hannah, you will recall, is one of two wives to Elkanah but unlike her fellow, Peninah, Hannah has no children, and so is an object of scorn, so much so that she refuses even to eat. She prays at the temple so earnestly that Eli, the priest, believes her to be drunk. But the Lord hears her voice and

grants her wish: she conceives and gives birth to Samuel, the seer who will become the greatest of all the Lord's servants in Israel.

The theme of Hannah's song – the redeeming power of the Lord – is echoed in the Magnificat. Both take as their basis the topsy-turvey nature of God's dealings with the world. That which men and women expect, God confounds. The bows of the mighty are broken but the feeble gird their strength, sings Hannah. He has put down the mighty from their seat, and exalted the humble and meek, declares Mary. For the writer of Luke's gospel, this leitmotif of the God who turns the world upside down will reappear in the Acts of the Apostles. For now, he builds upon Hannah's song by applying the mighty acts of God, the bizarre inversion of everything the world expects to be true, not simply to God's dealings with the powerful and poor as general concepts, but to his dealings with this particular poor and lowly individual. "From henceforth, all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

These magnificent words are placed by Luke – the narrative theologian – not on the lips of a hero, nor in the pen of a poet, but placed into the mouth of a common young Galilean girl, a girl perhaps of fourteen years. Luke does this because he knows that in her God has done the most extraordinary thing of all: he has entrusted his son, the very salvation of the world, to a humble and insignificant teenager, to the vulnerability of childbirth, to the poverty and need of the many who have not against, the world of the few who have.

There are few more ridiculous notions than the idea that the fate and the hope of all of human existence might be entrusted to a peasant in the world of the powerful, to a slave in the world of emperors, to a girl in the world of men. But that is how God acts, that senselessness is the love of God at work, and that love is not simply a cause for rejoicing but the very basis of existence for all that is created. The life of Easter which is God's gift to Mary is God's gift to every one of us, the gift of life through death, of glory through suffering, of the greatest of all triumphs from the humblest of all beginnings. If we truly honour Mary, we must follow Jesus Christ.