

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary 18th August 2019

Fr Simon Cuff

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people' words from the Gospel according to S. John the first chapter, beginning to read at the first verse. May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Working in a theological college made up of a diverse body of Christians, from across denominational divides, there is one name that is mostly mentioned in hushed and slightly uncomfortable tones: Mary.

The quiet, or *dis*-quiet, with which her name is uttered masks a certain awkwardness in discussing her at all. For some this awkwardness comes through through fear of offence. Christians who do not have a devotion to Mary or a discernible role for her within their Christian life fear offending those of us who do.

Or, the opposite, those of us with a devotion to our lady fear offending those who struggle to see how devotion to Christ can lead us to a relationship with Mary.

For others this awkwardness comes from a genuine incomprehension about the role of Mary in the life of any Christian church.

And for some there's an inherited suspicion that any reflection on Mary is likely to lead us astray as we try to follow Christ.

There's something about Mary. Something stopping us as Christians from speaking confidently about Mary and her place in the Church.

As catholic Christians, it's all too easy here to point the finger and highlight deficiencies in other Christian views of our Lady. We can rehearse our dogmas and shout our 'Aves' a little louder. We can hope by doing so we point more clearly to Christ by honouring his Mother.

And yet our celebration of the Assumption today offers something more. This great feast presents us with an opportunity to build up the body of Christ. It invites us to consider where in our presentation of the Faith we have offered a distorted Gospel. It challenges us to take up God's invitation to something deeper than satisfaction at our present broken and divided Church. It challenges us once again to say with Mary, 'yes to God'.

Wherever there is division or disagreement in the Church, we are tempted to form ourselves into a tribe and to proclaim our party line. We're right, they're wrong. We're in, they're out. Jew/Greek. Slave/Free. We fall back into the tribalism which Christ came to overcome.

Wherever there is division or disagreement in the Church, if we're to avoid the kind of tribalism Christ came to overcome, divisions present us with a challenge. We are invited to ask ourselves: how we have contributed to this or that division in the body of Christ? What might have become distorted in our presentation of the Gospel that has led the Church to this disagreement by a reaction or over-reaction?

Michael Ramsey, shortly before he was Bishop of Durham, in a lecture on Christian unity argued: 'We must go behind our divisions in the quest of something of which our several systems are distorted representations... the negotiation of unity must be part of a deep movement, within all our bodies, towards realising our distortions'.

Where have we in our proclamation of the Gospel contributed to these distortions?

Where has our presentation of Mary contributed to the awkwardness with which she is often met?

Too often we treat our devotion to our Lady as a kind of 'add-on'. Our Marian theology becomes a set of articles of faith necessary to the catholic faith: the immaculate conception, the virgin birth, the assumption, and so on. We present each in isolation as an article to be believed. We abstract them from the wider Christian life.

Such abstractions lead to Mary being overlooked elsewhere in the church. As Pope Benedict warns: 'If Mary no longer finds a place in many theologies and ecclesiologies, the reason is obvious: they have reduced faith to an abstraction. And an abstraction does not need a Mother'.

How do we break free of such abstractions? How do we articulate our Marian dogmas in such a way that they remind the Church of the importance of the Mother of God? How do we connect the Assumption we celebrate today to the rest of the Christian life?

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life.'

The Assumption, like all Marian theology, is not so much about Mary but a lot more about Christ. As we celebrate the ascent of Mary into heaven, and her bodily share in the resurrection life, we distort the Gospel if we focus our attention on Mary. It is the resurrection in which we she shares, of which Christ is the first fruits that is at the heart of today's feast: 'for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' as we heard in our first reading.

The Assumption is not so much about what happens at Mary's death, as the the new life which overcomes all our death and which we hope one day to share. The Risen life which is God's gift. Life in him. The Assumption reminds us of the risen life. It presents us with a heavenly image of the Resurrection breaking through in the life of Mary. In a Church ever tempted to live as if Christ is not Risen and in our midst, the Assumption reminds us that the body in which we share is none other than Christ's risen Body. And wherever Christ's Body is there is life: 'what has come into being is life'.

The Assumption fixes our gaze not upwards to watch Mary ascending, or backwards to an imagined past, but ever forwards to that new life in which God is willing us to share. That new life laid out for us in Mary's song which scatters the proud, brings down the mighty, lifts the lowly, fills the hungry. That new life in Christ which is God's ultimate act of deliverance on all his promises. That new life in which our divisions our healed, our distortions transformed, and we see God face to face.

Until then, we sing our 'Aves' in celebration of today's great feast not as those Christians who know that we have everything right, but as those Christians trying to live that risen life which is at the heart of todays feast.

We devote ourselves to our Lady not because we have everything right, but because she ever points us to the risen life of her Son, she ever invites us to seek Christ's

transforming presence to confront those wrongs identified in her song: pride, poverty, hunger, abuses of power and wealth.

We celebrate her assumption because we celebrate Christ's resurrection and because our Lady ever reminds us of the need to say 'yes to God', to be handmaids of God's will, and to be those agents of transformation of God's world as we seek to live the risen life of her Son.