

## Sermon: 13.8.17 The Assumption (Trinity IX), 2017

*"Thou hast Light in dark, and shut in little room, Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb."* John Donne

Leo Tolstoy, the Russian writer, tells in a short story of a harsh King who asked his priests and sages to show him God so that he might see him. The priests and wise men were unable to satisfy his desire.

Then a shepherd, who was just coming in from the fields, offered to help and take on the task of the priests and sages. From him the king learned that his eyes were not good enough to see God. Then, however, the king wanted to know at least what God does. "To be able to answer your question", the shepherd said to the king, "we must exchange our clothes". Somewhat hesitant but driven by curiosity about the information he was expecting, the king agreed; he removed his crown and royal robes and gave them to the shepherd and then had himself dressed in the simple clothes of the poor man. The shepherd looked at the king and said: "This is what God does".

Indeed, the Son of God, true God from true God, shed his divine splendor and, as St Paul states so clearly in his letter to the Philippians, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men; and being found in human form he humbled himself...even unto death on a cross" (cf. Phil 2: 6ff.). or to put it in Donne's words: *"He'll wear, taken from thence, flesh which death's force may try."* It is this great mystery, fulfilled in Mary, which we celebrate today on the Feast of her Assumption. Like a number of the great festivals there is more than one title for the day in question, each one giving a slightly different emphasis: so today is also called the Dormition or Falling Asleep of the Blessed Virgin, or more locally in rural England 'Lady Day in Harvest', which is perhaps my favourite. A little coy perhaps, but delightfully understated....

There is much of Mary in the scriptures, especially in St Luke's Gospel. There is also much of Mary that is held in what Kallistos Ware calls the 'inner tradition' of the Church-which might be compared to the family

story: those stories that families tell and that are passed on by the generations, which shape a family, give its members a sense of belonging and identity. Rather like the customs of a particular regiment, combined with their battle honours. It is from this early custom in the Church that today's Feast was established.

There are of course hints about the Feast in the scriptures, not least in that beautiful passage from Isaiah, which we heard a few minutes ago, and of course much later on in the Revelation of St John: but there is no explicit account, as there is of the Lord's Ascension. And there is also the work of what might be called our emotional logic: how could there be any other conclusion to the earthly life of the Godbearer, the one who had carried within herself the Living Word of God? Within whose own very being the King had set aside his royal robes and taken on the condition of the poor man, that is, of you and me, of our human race?

Mary has inspired love in the hearts of Christians down the ages, and she calls us in love: to set aside the cynicisms and doubts of our age and of our own particular earthly, mortal pilgrimages, those doubts and cynicisms that arise in response to the slings and arrows of life: some of which we draw to ourselves by folly or ignorance, some of which come whistling at us, shattering our vision of what we might have been or of what our life might have been. She calls us to follow her in handing ourselves over, gladly and freely, to the life-giving bonds of God's love for us, of his call to us, as he first called her in love. "Be it unto me according to thy word" is all that is required of us in response. Following on from Thomas' question to us in the sermon last week of "Who are you?", could we do better than being described as one who strives, day by day, however unimpressively, however ordinarily and unglamorously, to live the truth of those words of Mary's and to make them ours, beginning tomorrow morning? Amen.