

The Assumption of the BVM, St Barnabas, Oxford, 19 August, 2018, GDW

Isaiah 61.10, [Ps 45.10-17], Galatians 4.4-7, Luke 1.46-55

For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.

The celebration of the Dormition, the Falling Asleep, and the Assumption of the BVM, the Mother of God, is an invitation to joy and to hope. In the words of an Orthodox prayer for the day:

‘Now let heaven rejoice, all creation leap for joy. For the Virgin leaves earth, and goes to paradise. Praying and protecting, to all she has shown God’s salvation.’¹

In the C of E at least, what we are to believe about the celebration of this day is left open, and it has been a matter of a lot of argument. Hopefully, I’ll be able to say how the joy and hope of Mary’s passing from death to life is offered to those for whom the doctrine of the assumption is a stumbling block, or even hidden behind a veil.

The East Window in the chapel of Pusey House attempts to give artistic form to the arrival of the BVM in the heavenly places². There, at the top of the window

‘Mary and her Son are seated side by side, turned towards each other. Both are enthroned, both are crowned. But while [our Lord] Jesus wears his crown in his own right, Mary is receiving hers from the hands of an Angel. And while Mary’s head is inclined in adoration and her hands are joined in supplication, the head of Jesus is erect in authority [in his left hand holding an orb with a cross, representing his dominion as Saviour of the World] and his right hand is lifted in blessing’.³

This representation invites us to consider the Falling Asleep and Assumption in relation to the Incarnation of the Son of God and the redemption of humankind. Whatever we know and say about Mary flows from what we know about her relation to her Son. On the one hand, she is redeemed and saved by the God whose mother she is – he is her Lord and Saviour. On the other hand, in the words of John’s Donne, she is ‘her Maker’s maker’. There is no Christology without Mariology – there is no salvation in Christ, no renewal and re-creation, without her ‘be it unto me according to thy word’

‘The creation of the world was brought about by the sole fiat [decreed and command,] of God [and God said: ‘let there be light’]; the re-creation of the world was, by God’s dispensation, set in motion by the fiat [the self-dedication and active obedient decision] of a young village girl who was engaged to a carpenter.’⁴ [and Mary said, Be it unto me according to thy word], or, in the words of our second reading:

... when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,⁵ To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

¹ *Orthodox Feasts of Christ and Mary: Liturgical Texts with Commentary*, Hugh Wybrew, the Dormition, 128.

² raised up in her body as well as her soul, and given a place of special dignity near her Son

³ E. L. Mascall, ‘The Dogmatic Theology of the Mother of God’. In *The Mother of God: A Symposium by Members of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius*, ed by E L Mascall, Dacre Press, Westminster, 1949, 37-50, p 37.

⁴ *Ibid*, 39.

We cannot come to Christ and yet bypass Mary.

It is a great mystery that Almighty God waits on a creature like this, and not any creature, but in a particular and unique way, on Mary. If doctrines and practices connected with the Blessed Virgin Mary had not become such a source of conflict, we would no doubt feel and express in a more straight-forward way a simple and reverent gratitude to Mary for what she has done for all who have been redeemed and saved by her Son.

The joy of the Assumption is on the one hand a joy which is at once focussed on the work of Mary- a kind of marvel and delight in seeing such dazzling moral and spiritual beauty: as ‘a bride adorned with jewels’, ‘The king's daughter is all glorious within: her clothing is of wrought gold.’ This verse from psalm 45 emphasizes not only what is visible to the eye, the clothing of gold, but what is all glorious within. Applied to Mary, her motherhood is spiritual and moral as well as physical and natural. She is blessed not just as the mother who bore Christ, ‘the womb that bare thee, the paps that gave thee suck’, but also because she is all glorious within –the one who supremely, ‘hears the word of God and keeps it’.⁵

In the words of St Augustine: "Before conceiving the Lord in her body she had already conceived him in her soul". She had made room for the Lord in her soul [first] and thus really became the true Temple where God made himself incarnate, where he became present on this earth.’⁶

The Joy of this festival is, on the one hand, the joy of seeing and enjoying what is supremely beautiful and good and true in the radiant Mother of God, ‘the treasure house of the new covenant Manna’.⁷

But there is another joy, the joy of seeing the possibility of human nature bearing God – shining with the light of grace and truth, transformed and made new.⁸

Gerald Manley Hopkins in a poem comparing ‘The Blessed Virgin’ to ‘the Air We Breathe’, describes Mary’s bearing the divine life as something which is repeated in us. The virgin’s Son makes, it is a ‘marvellous’ to say:

‘New Nazareths in us’, ‘New Bethlems’, where Christ draws new ‘breath’ and
‘Who, born so, comes to be // New self and nobler me’⁹

⁵ Luke, 11.27-28 And it came to pass, as he spake these things, a certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed *is* the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked. But he said, Yea rather, blessed *are* they that hear the word of God, and keep it.

⁶ Mass on The Solemnity of The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Parish Church of St Thomas of Villanova, Castel Gandolfo, Tuesday, 15 August 2006

⁷ *Orthodox Feasts*, Wybrew, 128.

⁸ ‘Capable are we of God both by understanding and will: by understanding, as He is that sovereign Truth which comprehendeth the rich treasures of all wisdom; by will, as He is that sea of Goodness whereof whoso tasteth shall thirst no more.’ Here Richard Hooker describes both the insatiable hunger of the human heart and the human mind, and the possibility that this may be satisfied by coming to share in the Risen Life of Christ: “Capable are we of God.” Nothing else is good enough, we will not be satisfied by anything less, says Hooker, than ‘the participation of God Himself.’ Charles Miller, *Richard Hooker and the Vision of God*, p. 220..

In God’s providence we celebrate the Dormition only 10 days after the Transfiguration of our Lord on the 6th August. In the Transfiguration, the disciples glimpse something of the resurrection life shining and manifest in their Lord even before the Passion.

In the BVM, we see this possibility, the possibility of human nature bearing and conceiving the divine life: ‘New self and nobler me’.

This is the hope that any celebration of Mary’s motherhood offers, inviting us to see how even lives which are as confused, or wounded, or messed up as our own can be fruitful with the divine life. I will come back to this in a few minutes. The role of Mary helps us to see the divine possibilities and our own lives, however unlikely that seems, however un-divine, stuck, or limited, we feel or know ourselves to be.

In order to see how celebrating the Falling Asleep of the Mother of God is an invitation to joy and hope for us, I want to pause first to consider the doctrine of the Assumption more directly. Then, we will consider the role of Mary in relation to her Son and His Church. Then, we can return to the hope that this offers us and the whole world.

In 1950 Pope Pius XII declared it to be a matter of revealed dogma that ‘the Immaculate Mother of God the Ever-Virgin Mary, having completed her earthly course, was in body and soul assumed into heavenly glory’.¹⁰ For many, in the C of E and beyond, this promulgation was tactless and triumphalist. For others, he was only giving voice to the faith of the Church and the catholic tradition from the early, if not the earliest, ages.¹¹ The eastern tradition names this feast Mary’s “falling-asleep,” her “Dormition”. However, the Orthodox liturgy also witnesses to the belief that Mary was assumed into heaven, that three days after undergoing a natural death her body was resurrected and taken up to heaven.¹²

What is the basis of these beliefs, since they cannot be found in a straightforward way in the Bible? Many of the most ardent supporters of the doctrine of the Assumption, for example, the Pope Emeritus Ben XVI, the orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, and the modern Anglican Divine, Eric Mascall, of recent memory here in Oxford, all agree

⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe’, quoted in the sermon by Madelaine Wheeler, King’s College Halifax, 2018:

Of her flesh he took flesh://
He does take fresh and fresh,
Though much the mystery how,
Not flesh but spirit now//
And makes, O marvellous!
New Nazareths in us,/
Where she shall yet conceive
Him, morning, noon, and eve;//
New Bethlems, // and he born
There, // evening, noon, and morn—
Bethlem or Nazareth, //
Men here may draw like breath
More Christ and baffle death;//
Who, born so, comes to be
New self and nobler me
In each one // and each one
More makes, when all is done,
Both God’s and Mary’s Son.

¹⁰ Quoted in John Seward, ‘The Assumption’, *Mary’s Place in Christian Dialogue*, St Paul Publications: Slough, 1982, p 108 ff.

¹¹ Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, on the absence of the witness to such a doctrine before the 6th c, p 72.

¹² While the older traditions in the West also maintain that Mary died a natural death before her Assumption, the liturgical texts and the papal promulgation of 1950 are ambiguous, saying only that Mary ‘completed her earthly course’, a mode of expression which leaves open the possibility that she was taken up into heaven without dying.

that the doctrine is more of a theological than an historical affirmation. The different traditions that describe what happened at the BVM's death, whether it be in Jerusalem, or in Ephesus, whether the apostles were preaching the Gospel in faraway places, or miraculously brought together to be present for the Blessed Virgin's death, these accounts have an apocryphal or uncertain character. Even for a pope, one does not come to believe in the Assumption based on historical evidence and accounts of uncertain origin.

This does not mean that these accounts have no historical basis or origin. It is highly significant that in a world where relics brought wealth as well as spiritual treasure, that no churches have claimed to have any relics of the body of the BVM.¹³

The disagreement among Christians about what happened after the BVM's death is especially a disagreement about timing. The belief that Mary has already passed in body as well as soul from death to life assumes that Mary enjoys already, by a fitting and unique dispensation, the resurrection which all who are in Christ will one day share. The disagreement is especially about the timing of Mary's being taken up, not that its reality. The emphasis of some Eastern Orthodox theologians, that the mystery of the day belongs to the hidden depths of the life of the Church, a reality veiled in silence, 'not so much an object of faith as a foundation of our hope', suggests that there can be a greater measure of agreement between those who think or believe differently about this day than sharp disputes can allow or resolve.¹⁴ The reality transcends time, whether it belongs to the past or the future, and so belongs to the eternity in whose light we live even now. In other words, even if you are unsure about when Mary was or will be Assumed in body as well as soul into heaven, the joy and hope which this day promises is still offered now to all who have been knit into the body of Christ.

If historical evidence cannot provide certainty, what do we make of Mary's crown in the window at Pusey House? Or, to put it in another way, why is it true that 'all generations will call her blessed', as we heard from Mary's own lips in the Gospel today. The unique character of Mary's role was summed up in the term 'Theotokos', God-bearer, at the third ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431. This title is about the person of Jesus Christ, not first about the dignity of Mary. No new person was born in Bethlehem, the divine Word who was before creation with the Father and the Spirit took on human nature nine months before He was born. At one particular point in history, God the Son became man. However, God the Son did not cease to be man. When he ascended into heaven, Christ's humanity was not left behind or extinguished. 'It is because Christ is still a man that our [humanity]¹⁵ is renewed by our baptismal incorporation in him', and

¹³ To say, as Pope Benedict and Eric Mascall did, that the foundation of the belief is theological does not mean either that the Assumption relies on the witness of tradition, that what was believed and handed on, supplies what the Bible does not. Rather, to say that it is theological means, firstly, that it fits with what we know of the Mother's relation to the Son—that it makes sense, that it has the character of inner conviction rather than hard evidence. This theological emphasis also supplies the possibility of building a bridge between those who disagree about whether or not the Assumption can be or should be a matter of faith.

¹⁴ V Lossky, 'Panagia', in *The Mother of God*, ed Mascall, 35. On the eschatological reality of the day: '...we are now dealing with yet another transition – the transition from the world of becoming to the eternity of the Eighth Day, the passage from the Church to the Kingdom of God. This last glory of the Mother of God, the eschaton realized in a created person before the end of the world, henceforth places her beyond death, beyond the resurrection, and beyond the Last judgment. She participates in the glory of her Son, reigns with Him, presides at His side over the destinies of the Church and of the world which unfold in time, and intercedes on behalf of all before Him who will come again to judge the living and the dead.'

¹⁵ manhood

it because he is still a man that the Holy Communion continues his saving and transforming work. 'And it is because Christ is still man that the relation of mother to son which began when Mary conceived him in her womb still continues and will continue to all eternity. Because he is still a man, she is still his mother.'¹⁶

'By our baptism' and be the life of faith, 'we were incorporated into the human nature which was formed in her womb, and in our communions we are fed with that same human nature'.¹⁷ 'John Donne calls her "that fair blessed mother-maid, whose flesh redeemed us."¹⁸

This is why, from the early ages of the Church, Mary has been described as a New Eve, a New mother of all the living.¹⁹ Again, She is Eve in both a moral and a physical sense: We can say with Irenaeus that as 'the knot of Eve's disobedience received its unloosing through the obedience of Mary, [so] what Eve, a virgin, bound by incredulity, Mary, a virgin, unloosed by faith.'²⁰ 'the Christian returning from his communion can repeat in a totally new sense that words of Adam, 'The woman gave me and I did eat'.²¹

'Mary is still the human mother of the human Christ, she is the mother of the Church, and our mother too'.²² In carrying Christ in her womb, Mary carries in herself this future, she bears those who will have life in Christ.²³

This brings me back to the invitation to share in the hope of the Dormition and assumption, a hope which is ours whether or not we celebrate what we believe has happened already or will happen at the end of all things. In the words which we know as the Magnificat, My Soul doth Magnify the Lord, the BVM, inspired by the Holy Spirit and carrying within herself the Divine Word, fill out the simple 'be it unto me according to thy word'.

The Spirit witness that Mary is also the one, from the human side, who has fulfilled the hope of the Old Covenant. The opening words of the Magnificat echo the verses which we read from Isaiah: I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God....'. The prophet Isaiah in the next verse offers a prophetic picture of Mary's motherhood which has an especial importance for us:

¹⁶ Mascall, 42.

¹⁷ Mascall, 43.

¹⁸ Madelaine Wheeler, *ibid.*

¹⁹ E. B. Pusey, *Lenten Sermons*, 'Eve: The Course of Temptation', 'She was the Mother of our Redeemer, and so from her, as the fountain of His human Birth came all which He did, and was, and is to us. She, being the Mother of Him Who is our Life, became the Mother of Life; she was the Gate of Paradise, because she bore Him Who restored to us our lost Paradise; she was "the gate of Heaven," because He, born of her, "opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers;" she was "the all-undefiled Mother of holiness;" because "the Holy One born of her was called the Son of God;" she was "the light-clad Mother of Light," because He Who indwelt her and was born of her, "was the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."' "

²⁰ *Adversus Haereses*, 3.22.34

²¹ Mascall, 43.

²² Mascall, 43.

²³ One of the windows of St Thomas Church, Oxford, gives this a visual form. In one of the windows of the north aisle where mid-week Masses are celebrated, the heavenly Jerusalem is pictured as a woman who bears in her womb the Holy City the new Jerusalem. This woman evokes icons and images of the BVM where Christ is shown in her womb, but in this case, instead of the child, we see the holy city which will come down from heaven, the home and communion of all the saints who will one day belong to Christ. This heavenly city is in certain way inter-changeable with the icon of the unborn Christ in the virgin's womb.

For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.²⁴

She is like the earth and the enclosed garden in whom and from whom righteousness and praise will spring up, not just for herself, for the whole world.

Our hope is that this life will also spring up in us. The soil, we know, is of very different quality.²⁵

Yet, in Mary, we see the affirmation of the possibility of human nature being a bearer of the divine life.

On the one hand, her obedience, her burning self-dedication, her suffering for the sake of the divine love, all of these things rebuke what is less than obedient, or good, or true in our lives. She is a kind of mirror in whom we can see our faults. But, more than that, she is also a mirror in whom we see the possibility of bearing the divine life. In her, we see the hope that is ours in Christ. Our weaknesses will not have the last word. In the face of temptations to despair or to give up, we see in the Mother of God the hope and promise that Christ will draw new breath in us, making us new and nobler selves.

‘Now let heaven rejoice, all creation leap for joy. For the Virgin leaves earth, and goes to paradise. Praying and protecting, to all she has shown God’s salvation.’²⁶

²⁴ Is 61.11

²⁵ It is also why the Orthodox are reluctant to accept the doctrine of the Immaculate conception, it seems to remove Mary too far from human life. See Florovsky on this, ‘The Ever-Virgin Mother of God’, in Mascall, p 59.

²⁶ *Orthodox Feasts of Christ and Mary: Liturgical Texts with Commentary*, Hugh Wybrew, the Dormition, 128.