

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**The Blessed Virgin Mary**

**15<sup>th</sup> August 2021**

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It often puzzles UK holidaymakers visiting France in the summer to find all the shops shut on 15<sup>th</sup> August. This is because it is not a date that resonates with people in the UK, even if they are churchgoers. Yet it is a date on which the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican traditions of Christianity unite to celebrate the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In France it is a public holiday.

For Roman Catholics, this is the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin – a celebration of Mary being assumed body and soul into God's eternal presence as Queen of Heaven. For Orthodox Christians, it is the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God – a celebration of Mary falling asleep in the eternal arms of God at the end of her life on earth. In the church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio in Sicily, there is a mosaic which shows on one side the Nativity – Mary with the infant Jesus in swaddling clothes, placing him in the manger - and on the other side the Dormition – Mary fallen asleep, with the risen Christ holding her 'soul' as a baby in swaddling clothes, carrying her up to heaven to begin her new life in God.

Since there is no direct scriptural account of the end of Mary's life, Anglicans have been hesitant about the detail of both these feasts, so we celebrate the more generic Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. People sometimes think the Assumption and the Dormition mean that Mary didn't really die – she was simply assumed into heaven or fell asleep. In fact, neither feast denies the human death of Mary. But they do point to Mary's death as one of victory (the assumption of body and soul into heavenly glory) and of peace (the falling asleep). At the end of her earthly life, in which she had known terrible suffering and great joy, Mary shares in the victory of Christ over sin and death and reaches her eternal rest and reign in heaven.

There is so much one could say about Mary, and so little time in a short reflection like this. Her importance in the tradition of the churches cannot be overstated. It was the sense of wonder at her being so graced as to touch the life of God that led many to revere her.

Mary is central to the biblical story of salvation. Sometimes referred to as the new Eve (as Christ is referred to as the Second Adam), it is interesting to compare one telling reaction of Eve and Mary. The first time sin is mentioned in the Bible, when Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, their immediate reaction is to try to hide. It's a classic human response when we know we have done something wrong. Sin and shame close us in on ourselves, prevent us from being open to others and to God. None of us is immune from this, however hard we try. And it brings with it a sense of fear – fear of ourselves, fear of others and how they might respond if they knew what we were really like, and fear of God. The human heart closing in on itself.

Yet God's response to this closing in was to find a way of entering into the heart of humanity, in the incarnation. And the incarnation was made possible by Mary. What sets her apart is that sin has not closed her in on herself. She is open and receptive to God. When the angel Gabriel tells her she will bear Emmanuel – God with us – Mary's response is 'let it be'. She does not try to hide.

I will come back to Mary's response and where it leads. But first let us look at her song, the Magnificat, which we say or sing every day at Evening Prayer and heard in our Gospel reading today. After the visit of the angel she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is also expecting a child, John the Baptist. Elizabeth greets her with a blessing, and Mary responds with the Magnificat: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'

The song points us to God's saving love. As Mary is open to God and magnifies him – proclaims him - her own humanity is magnified, made fuller, more radiant. In our glorification of God, our openness to God's love, our humanity is healed and restored, made fully what God intends it to be. As the second century Bishop St. Irenaeus of Lyon put it: 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive, and the life of humanity is the vision of God.'

Yet the Magnificat is also deeply rooted in human existence. Its message includes politics, economics, ethics and society. The proud are brought low, the hungry fed and the rich sent away empty. There are echoes in this song, not only of our Old Testament reading from Isaiah today, but also of the song of Hannah following the birth of her son Samuel in which she praises God, reflects

on the reversals he brings about, and looks forward to his anointed one, the Messiah.

Mary's song, too, is a foretaste of the pain and struggle Jesus will face in ushering in the Kingdom of God. As Simeon foretells when she brings her son to the temple in Jerusalem for the first time, 'this child is destined for the falling and rising of many ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

The thing about Mary's response is that it is only the first step: 'let it be with me according to your word.' The writer Bernard Levin published a moving article about the courage shown by a group of ordinary Dutch people during the Second World War. He noted how, having taken the initial decision to hide a Jewish family in their homes to protect them from arrest, they carried on taking one step at a time, gradually placing their own lives at greater and greater risk. He marvelled how they had the courage to say to themselves: 'We have said A; now we must say B.'

It was the same for Mary. Her acceptance of the angel's invitation was only the beginning. But her openness to God, and her courage, did not fail her. There would be other visits to the temple at Jerusalem. With the twelve year old Jesus, who stayed behind questioning the religious leaders, causing his mother and Joseph sorrow as they searched for him. With the adult Jesus, overthrowing the tables of the money changers, offering his radical teaching in the temple courts in the face of growing opposition from another generation of religious leaders, culminating in his arrest and crucifixion. Mary followed her son to the Cross and beyond. The Assumption, the Dormition, is her reward. Our offertory hymn today, 'Sing we of the blessed Mother', puts it well.

Perhaps above all today we celebrate in Mary the openness, radical love and fearlessness seen in Christ himself. Like mother, like son. Remaining open to God's loving purposes 'whatever befall', she was, as the angel said, 'full of grace'. That grace, and her faith, carried her through. So it is not surprising that, in contemplating the end of her earthly life, the church should give her glory in these feasts. Today in our sister churches she will be celebrated as assumed into heaven, body and soul, or fallen asleep in the deep peace of God. All of us today can celebrate Mary, who opened God's way into the closed heart of humanity, now dwelling in eternal light and peace in the presence of God and the risen Christ.

We owe her something too. To be open ourselves, to God and to each other - not hiding, but learning to live without fear in the light and love of her Son. Each time we recite the Magnificat, may we learn to follow her example a little more, ready to receive and serve God. For St Irenaeus was right: 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive, and the life of humanity is the vision of God.'

Mary knew that, and she taught her son.

Amen.