

The Assumption of the BVM
A sermon by Fr John Muddiman

The Feast of the Falling asleep of the Blessed Virgin Mary on August 15th has been transferred to the nearest Sunday and is kept as a solemnity – the sanctuary candles have been lit in her honour. The belief that Mary was assumed into heaven at the end of her earthly life emerged in the 4th century and has been celebrated in East and West since the end of the sixth century. It was the only one of the five festivals of Mary that was omitted from the Book of Common Prayer, but as Cross and Livingstone in their incomparable Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church enjoy pointing out it was nevertheless retained in the calendar of the University of Oxford. The Anglican Communion has recently been catching up with Oxford, for this feast has been restored in the revised prayer books of the Anglican churches of the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the West Indies, and since 1999 in the Church of England. This is perfectly understandable since saints are normally commemorated on the day of their death, that is of their entry into glory; and that's what we celebrate today – Mary's entry into glory. Who can doubt that she, above all, is in heaven with her Son and her Saviour?

Fr Peter suggested that instead of an ordinary sermon, I could talk this morning about my experience on ARCIC II (The Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. During the fifteen years in which I was a member, we published statement on the Church, on Salvation, on Morals and on Authority, agreeing wherever we could – which was most of the time – and clarifying our reasons where we couldn't (on contraception, for example, or the role of laity in the government of the Church) Although overshadowed by other difficulties, I believe that this series of agreed statements is a considerable achievement, which one day –hopefully in the not too distant future – will help to mend the schism in the Western Church. The last statement we produced was entitled: Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ. And in case you haven't read it, I will give you a brief summary and a bit of commentary.

The document starts with an ecumenical re-reading¹ of scripture. There is nothing much about Mary in Paul or Mark, but later New Testament writers, Matthew Luke and John, show a growing interest in her significance. In Luke especially Mary is cast in the role of the “faithful poor in Israel” – the Old Testament church, those who look to God to fulfil his promise to Abraham and establish his reign of justice. At the same time she marks the beginning of the New Testament church, when she makes the first response to God's saving act in Christ. In other words Mary represents the continuity between the Testaments and Mary's song accurately summarises and anticipates the central message of her Son about the Kingdom of God. As the members of the Commission read the Bible together, we began to realise that the whole of salvation-history, creation, exodus, exile and restoration are filtered and focussed in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. Similarly in John's gospel, Mary is portrayed at the beginning, at the wedding at Cana, as one who petitions Christ to break open the new wine of the Kingdom, while at the end she is appointed mother of the true disciples, an image for our mother the Church

¹ Re-reading (French *relecture*) is a deliberate and conscious second reading which does not replace a first reading, whether historical-critical or confessional, but broadens and deepens it, taking the text as both living scripture for today and a harbinger of the coming Great Church of tomorrow.

The Bible is our common inheritance as Christians and when we read it together, open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we are drawn into closer unity with one another. I hope that Evangelical Anglicans if they read this statement will recognise that Mary's place in the thinking and worship of the Church is firmly grounded in sacred scripture.

The second section deals with the development of doctrine in the first five centuries, and we came to see that what Christians claimed about the full humanity and full divinity of Christ inevitably involved a claim about Mary that she was Theotokos, the God-Bearer, the Mother of God Incarnate. There is in this doctrine of the ancient Church an implication of shocking intimacy – namely that the eternal God should spend the first nine months of God's human existence in the body of Mary, nourished by her, affected by her diet and her mood swings, her heart beat and the sound of her voice. If we take the incarnation seriously, we need to say something about the body of Mary as well as the body of Christ. And when Mary received into her arms the dead body of her Son, can we doubt that part of her own self died with him – as scripture says “A sword will pierce your own soul also.” If we take atonement seriously, we have to say something about the soul of Mary as well as the soul of her Saviour. It is the method of ARCIC to try to go behind later confessional divisions and recover from Scripture and the Tradition of the early Church our common ground, and that return to source already provides a very substantial measure of agreement.

However it would be foolish to deny that one of the most striking differences between Catholics and many Anglicans is the way that this common inheritance has been developed or not developed in doctrine and worship since the Reformation. We tell that story in the third part of the document. The divergence was no doubt partly a matter of mutual self-definition over against the other side. The more the Protestants denied, the more the Catholics affirmed and vice versa. But the Reformers themselves were quite mild about Mary at first, compared with their fulminations against the Pope and Indulgences; there are some lovely things for instance in Luther's commentary on the Magnificat, and the Church of England retained four out of her five feast days in the Book of Common Prayer. But over time Mary became a theological football, kicked back and forth. Protestants accused Catholics of pagan superstition and Mariolatry; Catholics in their turn took grave offence at Protestant disrespect for the Blessed Virgin: it is one thing to have no regard for the Pope: it is quite another – approaching sacrilege – to have no regard for the Mother of God.

But the 20th century ecumenical movement has taught us to lower our defences and listen patiently with an open mind while others try to explain what is really important to them. And there are important issues here: it is not just a question of identity badges. Evangelical Anglicans are concerned that nothing should detract from the sole mediatorship of Christ; that's the way they read their New Testament and it fits with their own religious experience, that in Christ through faith by grace we are all though sinners justified and put right with God. The focus is on the moment of conversion and commitment. Anglo-Catholics and Roman Catholics on the other hand were concerned to include all the many ways in which God make his appeal for us to turn back to him - through nature, through society, through material things like water bread and wine and Mary for them sums up this incarnational inclusivity. Put it like that, and it is not so obvious that this has to be an either/or. It is possible to have both/and.

Finally we get to the tricky bit of the document: the fourth section dealing with the two Marian dogmas and the new framework for understanding them created by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. You may remember that the Council rejected a separate dogmatic constitution on Mary and included this theme instead in *Lumen Gentium* on the doctrine of the Church – a very significant change of emphasis. Accordingly, what the Commission attempted to do was to move the focus away from anthropology towards ecclesiology and eschatology. Forgive the jargon. If you start with anthropology, the doctrine of human nature, i.e. the typically Western view of original sin, shared by Anglicans and Roman Catholics (the Orthodox, incidentally, have never accepted this view) then you may feel the need to protect Mary from contamination, and make her an exception. But if you start with the doctrines of the Church and of Christian hope, then Mary becomes not an exception but a representative example and a paradigm of grace and hope in Christ.

Let us start with the Immaculate Conception of 1854, that Mary was from her conception preserved immune from all taint of original sin. At one of our earlier sessions I presented a paper arguing that Augustine had badly misread St Paul and that there is no biblical basis for the doctrine of original sin. To press the point I claimed that getting conceived is just about the only thing any of us ever does for which we are entirely innocent. And since we are all immaculately conceived there is no harm in saying that Mary was. Needless to say, my argument was rejected as sophistry. But my serious point was that this doctrine is phrased in a surprisingly negative and minimal way. What if we tried to express it in positive terms? That given the all-pervasiveness of sin in human society, God prepared Mary from the beginning to bear his human image by a special application of divine grace. That surely makes good sense. She must have been a good mother – just look at her Son. And the doctrine ascribes that goodness to the One to whom it is due, that is, to God. It is important to stress this point. The Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is not concerned to exalt Mary but to praise the God who graced her in preparation for her role.

Protestants object that if Mary was free from original sin, she would be made an exception to the principle of Romans 3.23, that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”; but again it should be emphasised that the Catholic doctrine is not saying that Mary earned her way to salvation by her own merits – one of the views that Paul is combating in Romans – but, on the contrary that she is the best example of the total effectiveness of divine grace. Mary is the pattern of grace in Christ; Protestants who rightly cherish the doctrine of *sola gratia* should see her as their ally.

But what of the Bodily Assumption? Isn't this just a case of the Roman Catholic Church pandering to the popular cult of the Virgin among excitable southern Europeans and Latin Americans? Where is the evidence? And even if it were the case that Mary's mortal remains were for some reason nowhere to be found, why should that be the subject of a solemn Papal declaration as recently as 1950? Let me say as a historian of early Christianity, there is nothing in the New Testament or the early Fathers to suggest that this doctrine belonged to the memory of the Apostles. But it does not depend on historical evidence; it is a deduction from an anthropological premise: since death is the

punishment for sin and since Mary was sinless, she could not die, or at least could not have stayed dead.

At one of our sessions, I argued that the premise was faulty: that the view that physical death is the punishment for sin is very much a minority view in the Bible, in which for the most part death is seen as a natural consequence of being the sort of creatures we are: "All flesh is grass". And therefore what the doctrine of the Assumption ascribes to Mary is true of all of us: that at death God keeps his promise to glorify us in Christ, so there is no harm in attributing it to Mary. Needless to say, the other members of the Commission rejected this argument as another piece of sophistry on my part.

There was a debate in the medieval church as to whether the Blessed Virgin Mary died and was resurrected, or never died but was assumed alive into heaven, or whether her dead body and her soul were taken up simultaneously and reunited in the presence of God. The 1950 dogma does not arbitrate on this old dispute. It simply states that Mary is in heaven in the fullness of her being, that bodily existence which she shared with the Incarnate Word, and this implies a fortiori that all faithful Christians may hope for the same destiny.

If we change the vocabulary then and speak of Mary's sanctification, the pattern of grace, and of her glorification, the pattern of hope, can we not affirm together these truths?

Some Catholics may still want to take these doctrines as unique privileges of the Mother of God; others like me, reading carefully the documents of the Second Vatican Council may want to see Mary as a type of the humble believer and a type of the Church as a whole, as representative of the grace and hope that we have in Christ but that difference is only a matter of emphasis, not of substance. There is no reason why Mary should divide us. Indeed, there are good grounds for believing that Mary can and should unite us.

Finally, the Feast of the Assumption is not primarily about anthropology or even about ecclesiology or eschatology, it is about doxology, about worship. The Blessed Virgin, discreetly as always, inspires our prayer and devotion with that exaltation and joy that glorious achievement of salvation in the communion of saints that humility and love and heroic faith that run through her Magnificat.

Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord
Rejoice my spirit in God my Saviour,
So tenderly has he looked upon his servant
Humble as she is.
From this day forth
All generations will call me blessed
So wonderfully has he dealt with me,
The Lord, the Mighty One!

Amen

PS. Along the road from me there lives a family with three kids. I passed the mum in the street the other day going off to the shops; she was pushing a buggy with her baby daughter in it, with the younger son holding on tight, and the older one, three or four years old, rushing off down the road. She called him back with a slight tone of firmness in her voice; but I noticed a look of secret pride in her eyes: already he wants to make his own way.

It is possible that Mary has just as much affection for those of her children who prefer to toddle off on their own, than for those who are always tugging at her skirts, if she is indeed, as we believe, the Mother of all Christians.