

Ven John Beer, Archdeacon of Cambridge
The Feast of the Virgin Mary
Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
Readings: Rev.11.19-12.6; Gal.4.4-7; Luke1. 46-55

Virgin Mary : Assumption 15. 8. 10

For he has looked with favour on his servant, lowly as she is.....(Luke 1: 48)

In an ivory panel, carved in Constantinople at the end of the 10th century, and which forms the centrepiece of a gem-studded cover of a Gospel book, once the property of the German Emperor Otto 3rd, the Virgin Mary lies on her death bed, with Jesus beside her, holding up her soul, wrapped like a newborn child in swaddling clothes, as if he has just plucked it from her body. It is the moment in Orthodox tradition of Dormition, or Falling Asleep of the Blessed Virgin. The Roman Catholic tradition has tended to see Mary's final moments on earth and her journey to heaven rather differently, though some within this tradition are happy to admit that she died a natural death, while others are not. The Roman Catholic Church was still leaving the matter open in the 1950s. Yet in spite of the disagreement in emphasis and detail, both traditions agree that Mary got there in the end, and in bodily form.

The Bible is full of comings and goings, but also of absences – things we'd love to know about, but which aren't mentioned. In a sense, we know so very little about any of the people whom our Christian inheritance takes for granted. And at the heart of these absences, of course, is our tiny knowledge of a man whose thirty-odd years, if lived now, might have created enough data to fill many computer libraries. Yet ironically, the world has ended up already with countless libraries worth of opinion and story about this man. And why? Because absences, silences, seduce the human imagination into telling stories to fill the gaps. What was Jesus like to live

with, 'what did he have for breakfast' kind of questions, very modern questions, how might the divine presence in human form have been recognised ?

And on this day, when we remember with thanksgiving another life, another death, we have to admit we know little or nothing about the Virgin Mary either, her life, birth or death. And yet silence has invited the telling of stories. And in life the famous people get the best stories told about them !

It's a commonplace in the history of Christian discussions about who Jesus was, as God incarnate, though we must be careful about too many generalisations, that as there was an increasing emphasis upon the divine nature of Christ, his being of 'one-substance' with the Father, God from God, and all that, so the discussion seemed to lose touch with what we know as the man from Galilee who'd wept in Gethsemane and ached for Lazarus. And as, so to speak, in the early centuries Christ was 'divinised' out of his humanity, so the Virgin Mary's role and character seems to fill the vacuum, satisfying that need for a more sympathetic intermediary between human beings and God. She becomes the one to help ordinary believers relate to an increasingly distanced Jesus. Mary is pictured as close, compassionate, human, the *mater dolorosa*, the grief stricken mother – a powerful image for those who'd lost children through plague and starvation – Mary, *maria lactans*, whose breasts and milk are both proof of Jesus' humanity, but also a reminder to him that he was once weak. Mary, *stabat mater*, the mother who stands by, at the foot of the cross. Mary becomes an essential part of learning the grammar we need to help us speak in the language of salvation. And although Anglicans, however Reformed we may be, don't need to be too afraid of Mary, there are perhaps good reasons for many of us becoming cautious about where some Marian theologies have led parts

of the Church. Those beautiful Marian polyphonic texts which sound so stunning sung in Latin, and which stretch the theological imagination almost to the limit, and the language of 'Mary as 'theotokos, mother of God', can start to look suspiciously like just another version of that same tendency which served to distance the human Christ from us.

In a stunning group of poems, Holy Sonnets, John Donne encourages us to make connections in the mind about Mary. He sees her womb as a kind of monastic place where Jesus takes lodging until Mary's time comes. Then, at last, the foetal Jesus, this immensitie, leaves his well-belov'd imprisonment, to enter our world, and Donne then plays beautifully upon the relationship between Mary, the mother of God in Trinity, and her child Jesus, who is both her Son and her Lord.

Ere, by the spheres, time was created, thou
Wast in his minde, who is thy Sonne, and Brother;
Whom thou conceiv'st, conceiv'd; yea thou art now
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother

So, why was Mary assumed eventually to have been assumed ? Well, because by now in the tradition's mind, she's different, and just as her purity has to be protected, so has her specialness in the divine economy.

Thus, in death she becomes the centre of important assumptions, as it were. In the Bible, Enoch was believed to have gone directly to heaven; the death of Moses was clouded in great mystery; for, as Deuteronomy says, 'No one knows to this day where he was buried.....' Elijah was swept up to heaven in a whirlwind on a chariot of fire. Although Mary was a saint, unlike so many saints in early centuries whose graves and martyrdom were venerated and their relics a very powerful stimulus to devotion, nothing was known of her death or place of burial – no body to venerate, no relics to touch. So absences, silences, generate stories in the

imagination. For some parts of the tradition, then, she who was the image of purity and uncorruptedness should surely have not suffered corruption in the grave.

Perhaps, in her assumption, she was reanimated immediately after death by the return of her soul to the body, and was carried to heaven by angels, where death could not prevail against her. Or perhaps, death itself was unworthy of her. Might it have been a rather different story altogether ?

Whatever we, as well mannered Anglicans, make of all this, if we're to transform what has been a bit of a lecture into a sermon we must quickly recover something of the lowliness of the Magnificat we began with. For if our assumptions about Mary's death are what they are – different for each of us - then our assumptions about her rootedness in our humanity aren't a matter of opinion or taste. We modern people, with our knowledge about genes and genetics, however we choose to 'read' Mary's conception of a son, are radically changed and inspired by the conceit that Jesus was truly one of us; that he was, in the broadest sense, our human relative, and as some early Christian writers suggested, (to gar aproslepton, atherapeuton) What Jesus did not assume, that is, take up into his being human, was not healed, was not redeemed. For, without a truly human Jesus, there's no real connection with what God has done for us in Christ, we are not uniquely 'touched' him. And without the role of Mary, who received God's call and waited in obedience, Christ, 'immensitie', is not truly born in us.

On this day of Assumptions, I suppose that other kinds of assumptions are things taken up, in the mind, in the heart. But God, unlike us, never makes false assumptions. They're to be trusted completely. For our God assumes the very best

in us, assumes the very best for us, and in the end, I want to suggest, that's what today's feast is really about - God assuming the very best in and for Mary.

As we gather to make eucharist, we share not so much in a service, but, as a recent preacher said, in a sort of 'reception', in that normal sense of the word – that is, being invited, received, greeted and then being offered food and drink. In turning up to this reception, as opposed to any other reception, we come in part as unworthy guests who nevertheless share that same flesh and blood which Christ and Mary shared. We're reminded that each new day brings to birth in us, and for us, another twenty-four hours, another day in which to redeem the time, while we have time. So let us, on this new day, rejoice that Mary brought to birth for our sake the Word made flesh, and that her part was remembered and cherished in such richness. As Austin Farrer says, 'She goes into Christ's mysterious body as he once came from her womb. Once she was home for him, now he is home to her'.

I pray that we, who receive Christ's presence this morning in bread and wine, may also find our true home in him.