

Sermon Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary 2019

As Anglicans, we would be aware that for many in our church, Mary remains an ambiguous, if not controversial figure. This is a great peculiarity in our church. Because in the gospels Mary is present in the life of Jesus in a way no other figure comes close: at his conception, his birth, his childhood, his public ministry, his death, his resurrection and finally in the upper room of Pentecost. It would seem, then, that keeping Mary at arm's length (more often than not) grows out of simple prejudice against her, coming from of an ignorance that is very hard to overcome.

But there is no denying the deep place Mary has earned in our collective Christian memory and identity, even our Anglican memory and identity. Mary has a very particular English title: 'Our Lady'. Almost every English church of any decent size had a 'lady chapel.' Even as the English iconoclasts of the 16th century went around the country beheading the images, white washing the walls, and smashing the stained-glass windows, the Lady Chapels remained. This church, in fact, was the first Anglican Church in Melbourne to have a specially designated 'Lady Chapel.' And this place - *this* 'Lady Chapel' - has become the centre, the well spring, the engine house, really, of prayer in this parish. Under Mary's gentle gaze and watchful eye, the daily prayers are said here. Faithful lay members of this church gather, day in, day out, in prayer. Often in silence and alone, and sometimes for hours.

But it is not that helpful to think that Mary is merely *tolerated* within Anglicanism. It is actually important that we affirm and assert that she is *required* for a truly authentic faith. Large swathes of protestant Christianity have robbed themselves of the *fullness of faith* because of their suspicion and neglect of Mary. The strange irony is that the protestant reformers thought that by shoving Mary into some dark, dank cupboard would purify the faith, but when in fact the opposite was, and is, true. A truly authentic Christian faith *must* give Mary due honour. You cannot say you subscribe to a full, lively, biblical, traditional faith without an appropriate devotion and honour to Mary. How so? Because without Mary there is no faith!! Without Mary we rob ourselves, we get a half faith. But God wants us to enjoy *fullness* of faith. The essential catholic insight being that if we honour the mother, we honour the Son. And, saying the right things about Mary will help us say the right things about Jesus.

For this reason, then, the gospel placed before us today to commemorate this feast. A reading which reminds us of *the one and only* reason why Mary is honoured: simply, that she is indeed the *Mother* of Jesus. In the touching meeting between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, it is in this simple fact – a recognition of *the unique life* that grows within Mary – that we are reminded that *Mary is not* honoured by the Church as an end in itself. She is not, and in fact cannot, be honoured apart from her son. And where that does occur, that *is* rightly condemned as an abuse. But *it is* as mother of the Lord, the mother of God, *the Theotokos* – the God-bearer – that Mary deserves our respect, our honour and our love. She bears the living word of God within her. And she gives that Living Word to *us*.

That living Word is given to us! And like Mary, we need to nurture, care and protect the gift entrusted to us! And to fight for it! I am sure we all know how forces press hard against us to undermine, to compromise, to destroy God's gift to us! It was surely the very news of Mary's pregnancy – in a time and place where this new could be a death sentence - that saw her flee to Elizabeth, for safety and comfort. Luke tell us, *she went (with haste!) as quickly as she could*, more than suggesting the urgency of the situation. Mary listens to that instinct to nurture and protect. She must work to guard the gift entrusted to her. And we, too, must fight for this gift of life, the gift of faith entrusted to us. And it is a fight! The first reading today from Revelation leaves us in no doubt about the struggle! *The woman adorned with the sun, a crown of twelve stars*, bearing the child *who is to rule the nations*, pursued by the dragon! If we seek to bring life into the world, if we seek to bring God's vision and truth to birth, we can be sure the dragon - swinging its deadly tail - will be after us.

We need to nurture care, protect the faith, the living Word entrusted to us. If we wander into church each week having not prayed or read your bible since the last time you were in church, then the dragon more than likely has you in its claws. It will be the culture which so devalues life and ignores God's truth which is shaping us. If we, as disciples of the Lord Christ are not formed in the habits of prayer, not familiar with the teachings of the church, not confidently assenting to its timeless truths, then all the myriad of voices clamouring for your attention will be what you are listening to and what is forming your hearts and minds.

Growing in faith, protecting and nurturing faith, doesn't just happen! And in this sense, it not so much out-right assaults against our faith that undermine it and kill it. It is indifference! It is allowing ourselves to just drift along, imagining that *if I just keep on doing what I've always everything will be ok*. Well, the current state of the church should give lie to that! As I've said before, I have you here for an hour and half each week, if I'm lucky. Because in fact (if we are honest) for most people attached to this church their commitment is fortnightly, or monthly, if that. And for that hour and half people still complain and moan that mass is too long and preventing them from rushing to the sherry table and their morning coffee. St José Maria Escriva convicts us when he says: *you say the mass is too long because your love is too short*.

The life God gives us should inspire in us great love!! If we are not working to grow, nurture this, it will not thrive! How can we withstand the attacks, if we are not equipped?! And, if it is not the things of God that are equipping us/shaping us, it *will be* the culture around us that is! It will be the voices that *oppose God* and his law of life that we listen to. And I know this happens! Because I talk to you!! You tell me!! I hear from *your own lips* ideas and beliefs *are not* those of the church, are not those revealed to us, given to us, by God! If we do not nurture and protect the faith entrusted to us by a life of personal prayer, or familiarity with the scriptures, or the teachings of the church, then without fail, we will go along with what the culture around us is saying. This will mean that in the great ethical issues of our age, we will, increasingly, see life as cheap and disposable. If our idea of God is simply as 'the great architect of universe', or that we can ascend to God by our own efforts, or that every good person goes to heaven when they die, well, these are not biblical or Christian ideas and other non-Christian influences are pressing into our lives.

If it is ideas of personal choice and rights and equality which shape our ethic, then the voices we are listening to are not those of our faith! Now, we can (and must!!) engage with the issues of our day. And in Christian life there can be a great diversity on the non-essentials. But they need to be examined through the rightly-ordered framework provided by our faith. Now, as a parish we are working toward implementing a system of home groups. And home groups have been shown to be the single most effective way to both grow churches and individual faith. I hope that you will all seriously take up that invitation when it comes.

My brothers and sisters, Mary's instinct is so true, so right: the gift of the living Word needs to be nurtured, protected. But this life that Mary so rightly holds dear of course only pointing us toward the greatest triumph of God's life: the resurrection! And this being what St Paul is at such pains to remind us in the reading today from his First Letter to the Corinthians. This feast of the Assumption reminds us that God's victory in the resurrection of Christ – and promised to all believers - Mary *already* shares in by her being '*full of grace.*' This feast reminding us, challenging us, to nurture and protect this gift of God. Not allowing it to be compromised, neglected, chipped away, undermined by complacency or by listening to opposing voices. But to nurture it and protect it so we too might fully share in resurrection life. Amen.