

Sermon Feast of the Assumption 2020

The faith of the Anglican Church in Georgian England was *not* a high point in the history of our church. The *early* 18th century was the Age of Reason. The churches in England, such as they were, lacked vitality. Attendance was poor and there was little enthusiasm for spiritual matters. In the middle of the century, a change swept the country. Under John and Charles Wesley, a movement known as The Great Awakening took hold. The effort of the Wesleys, of course, eventually gave rise to Methodism. The “Awakening” produced powerful preachers who encouraged a personal faith in God. Thousands who had previously thought little of religion were converted. And their ‘brand’ of faith, if you like, has left a mark at least on protestant Christianity to this day. It would not be until the 1830s that the Oxford Movement and what we would know as the Catholic Revival took hold. So, between Enlightenment rationalism and an anaemic church life on the one hand, and the fervour of evangelical revival on the other, there was not much sense of the historic and catholic aspects of the faith.

In this context arose the Romantic poet William Wordsworth. Even if politically radical in his youth, he never abandoned his somewhat conventional religious upbringing. His work in fact reflects an active engagement with questions of faith and spirituality. In 1822 – some 11 years before Keble’s *Assize Sermon* and Newman began issuing the *Tracts for the Times* – Wordsworth penned a short poem entitled, ‘The Virgin’. Pushing past Enlightenment rationalism and Evangelical fervour Mary’s own prophecy, *all generations will call me blessed*, proved true! Wordsworth opens his poem,

*Mother! whose virgin bosom was uncrust
With the least shade of thought to sin allied.
Woman! above all women glorified,
Our tainted nature's solitary boast;*

Our tainted nature’s solitary boast.... It’s a remarkable assertion, not least considering the cultural and religious context from which it emerged. But in a single line Wordsworth distils so much about the honour due the Virgin Mary, but also the truth of human nature. But both ideas together – the rightful honour bestowed on Mary and our true human nature – tells us what we hope for, what is *our* destiny. For it is a profound truth of the faith catholic that the honour and glory Mary already enjoys, she *anticipates* for us. She shows us what will be ours also in hope.

Our tainted nature's solitary boast. Wordsworth here is really just picking up an idea loved and widely explored by the Church Fathers. Even if the Anglican Divines didn't find much room for the role and place of Mary in the life of the English Church, they *did* find room for the writings and teachings of the Fathers. And for the Fathers a critical idea in understanding and appreciating the role of Mary was as *the New Eve*. For the Fathers, this was just an expansion of the Pauline idea of Christ as the New Adam, as expounded in the Epistle reading today. Mary as the New Eve – or for some writers the Second Eve - is the *earliest* of her titles. As we know, over the course of the centuries many titles of honour were added to Mary, many of which still rattle nervous Anglicans. But this earliest of her titles shows us how it is solidly anchored within the breadth of Christian orthodoxy, being as it is simply *an expansion* of central biblical insights.

To begin, the Fathers saw Mary and her Son foretold in the prophecy of Genesis 3:15. To the serpent God says, *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.* The Fathers called this portion of Genesis the *protoevangelium*: the first gospel. Here, at the very outset of sacred Scripture and of God's dealing with humankind, is the announcement of the Redeemer, of a battle between the woman and the serpent, over which the woman's offspring will be ultimately victorious. The victorious offspring of course Christians identify as Christ. The woman, then, of this 'first gospel' rightly identified as Mary, his mother.

Where Eve said 'No' to God, to God's plan, to God's dream for humankind, Mary says 'yes'. Where Eve's faith failed, Mary's stood firm. Where Eve ignores the divine command, Mary cooperates with it. Whereas Eve *in pride* presumed to stretch out and take what was not hers to take, Mary *in humility* accepts God's invitation to become the Virgin mother of his Son. Mary reverses Eve's disobedience with her obedience just as Christ reverses Adam's disobedience by his obedience *unto death, even death on a cross*. St Irenaeus in the second century (in the echo of the apostles themselves) asserted, 'Being obedient she became the cause of salvation... for the whole human race.' And elsewhere he writes, 'the knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief Mary loosed by her faith.' The Fathers, then, frequently settle on this simple idea: Death through Eve, life through Mary. *Our tainted nature's solitary boast.*

It is only when we accept the scope and extent of *our* tainted nature that we can accept that Mary truly is worthy of the honour, respect and devotion the church bestows upon her. Adam's pride – which clings so closely – is what prevents us from seeing how persistent and relentless *is* our rebellion against God; how we, like Eve, keep on saying No; how we keep on presuming to do our own thing; how we keep on the course of disobedience; how we keep on down-playing or explaining away the reality of sin and its impact; how we continue to permit sin to work its corrosive effect in our lives. That is the cost of that first No. That is the cost of our tainted nature.

But in Mary, we find someone who rises above that. This is why even at a symbolic level - the level of a religious imagination - this feast today: Mary, '*having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory*'. Even if as Anglicans we are not bound to believe it, (yet even if the witness of the Tradition firmly points us in that direction) we ought to be able to assent to it as a symbolic and spiritual truth. Because she *rises above* our tainted nature: she cooperates completely with God's plan. She says 'yes' to God. It's not pride which determines her path, but humility. She does not seek to clasp on to her idea for her life. But she submits to God's plan for her life. Mary, *full of grace* – the angel's own recognition of her singular privilege - rises above our tainted nature.

And so she shows us that this is possible. Mary the first Christian - the *proto-Christian* – (through her yes, through her humility, through her co-operation with God) shows us what is the vocation of *every* Christian. If we are to rise above our tainted nature, we too must be filled with grace. We too must learn to say Yes to God. We too must overcome the pride which seeks to displace God from his throne. Mary allows God's word to be spoken to her, to grow within her. She allows for that Word to literally take flesh within her. That *spoken* Word becomes in her the *living* Word. This is the calling of the Christian! To allow Christ to come to us, for his living Word to be spoken to us, for this Word to so take hold and grow within us and come to life. The victory over that old serpent first takes shape in her. So, Mary gives humanity hope, a hope for the perfection that will be fulfilled in us when we too are released from this tainted nature. We, like her, can rise above all that seeks to keep us back and hold us down. We celebrate her, give her honour, rightly find a place for her in our faith and in our hearts because Mary - *our tainted nature's solitary boast* - is a sign that God still has high hopes for us all. Amen.