

Sermon Feast of the Assumption of the BVM 2021

Today we take a pause from our exploration of the Eucharist, and delight in this wonderful feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It would be fair to say, though, that just as the Eucharist can be the cause of some contention, so too can the church's faith in Mary. Which is a great pity. We have considered how the Eucharist is a gift to the *whole* church, not just parts of it. And as the church was born at the foot of the cross, so too Mary is a gift to the *whole* church, not just parts of it. At the outset it is important to repeat, that, when considering the place of Mary (again, just as we did for our reflection on the Eucharist as Presence) that it is not a helpful starting point to assert that the terms of reference are set by either the Reformation Church or the Roman Church. It is sufficient to rest upon the faith of *the apostolic church*, and that as contained in the record of Scripture and formulated in the Ecumenical Councils. And what we find there is certainly sufficient for a *robust* theology, spirituality, and devotion to the Blessed Mother.

“What do Anglicans believe about Mary?” Clearly this is something of interest to many of us, and for a variety of reasons. The more Catholic-minded among us tend to ask because we already have some degree of devotion to the Blessed Mother, and we do not wish to see that diminished. Many Evangelicals, on the other hand, worry that any kind of devotion to Mary would be a sign that Anglicanism has become a bastion of latent popery, ready to swallow us whole into the belly of the beast...

To help cut through some of the contentions, it is probably helpful to remind ourselves that Anglicanism has always accepted the first four Ecumenical Councils as authoritative. This means we accept the decree of the First Council of Ephesus of 431 in which Mary was to be regarded not merely as *Christotokos* (the Christ-bearer) but *Theotokos* (the God-Bearer or ‘Mother of God’). To deny the special place that Mary holds in the history of salvation as the one whom God chose to bear His Son, the one from whom God took human flesh, is to deny the Incarnation itself.

Catholic Anglicans should rest easy that veneration of Blessed Virgin Mary does not contradict either Scripture or the Anglican formularies. A simple prayer like the *Hail Mary*, which is mostly scriptural, and which asks the Blessed Mother to pray to her Son on our behalf, we ought not have any trouble with. It does nothing more than what Christians do every day when we ask our friends and loved ones to pray for us.

We affirm what Scripture says in Luke 2, that Mary is “*full of grace*” and that “*all generations shall call (her) blessed.*” And the Magnificat which is said or sung at Evening Prayer is a daily reminder that Mary is no ordinary woman but a great saint, indeed the greatest of the saints. And so, Mary in fact reminds us – and we all need reminding of this – that *the most beautiful thing in all creation is a saint.* The church has long argued that Mary is in fact the most perfect saint. In William Wordsworth’s exquisite little poem, *The Virgin*, Mary is identified as ‘*our tainted nature’s solitary boast.*’ The saint the most beautiful thing in creation, and so Mary, we rightly deduce, is the most beautiful thing in creation.

Predictably enough, nervousness arises around such claims and that in Mary being so elevated, raised so high, that she obscures the uniqueness and all-sufficiency of Christ. And if that were so, we should be rightly unsettled. But Mary can no more rival Christ than the reflection of a face in a mirror can rival that face. Mary *cannot* obscure Christ. *All her beauty is his.* She is only his obedient humble handmaid. But that is precisely why she is so honoured. Mary’s greatness, and our devotion to her, is completely dependent on him! And her whole effort now, in interceding with him for us in heaven – that is praying for us, just as we pray for each other – is to point beyond herself to Christ. And also, whenever she appears to anyone on earth, it is to point beyond herself to Christ. (The record of these miraculous visitations is so widespread and compelling. And we must not rule this possibility out. God is *not yet* finished with his people and so there must always be room for the miraculous.) Mary points to Christ. In the fundamental formula for Mary - *Mother of God* - is contained the fundamental formula for Christ: *true God and true man.* God truly born from his truly human mother. And Mary *points to Christ* in being declared *full of grace.* And for this reason: she was filled with grace because she was filled with Christ!

It is no accident that in the vast canon of Christian art, as in Scripture, almost always Mary is portrayed in relation to Christ. In this, thousands of artists through the generations have found their inspiration, and in so doing conveyed a profound truth: *Mary directs us to her Son!* She is about to conceive Christ (at the Annunciation); has just given birth to him (at the Nativity); surrounds his infancy (as the Madonna) stands at his cross (at the Crucifixion); or receives his dead body (in the Pietà). Her assumption, according to ancient tradition, is to him; when she goes to her reward, it is for what she did for him; and when she appears on earth it is to do his work.

Mary's light is like that of the moon, totally reflected from the sun, in this case the Son of God. The point all being, that *whatever* we say about Mary necessarily comes from what we say about Christ! Anything said of Mary is Christocentric. Whatever our faith in Mary is based on what we believe about Christ. What we teach about Mary in turn illumines our faith in Christ. Mary only directs us to her Son. And in this she is the perfect model, the exemplar, of Christian faith and discipleship. Mary is always turning us, directing us, pointing us to Jesus. Forget all the other Mission Action Plans, programs for evangelism, mission initiatives and all the rest! In Mary we find the perfect mission plan: *look to Jesus, turn to Jesus, trust in Jesus!* If that sounds simple, well it is! But how different our own lives would be if we actually permitted a complete reorientation to Christ. How unstuck the Church has become because it has failed to grasp this simple truth. How preoccupied it has become with everything *other* than the truth Mary proposes: Christ alone! Look to him. Turn to him...

Mary has only one role and gift: to direct us to her Son. The anxiety that the honour shown her detracts from Christ really is misguided. The faith of the church catholic is clear: whatever honour or devotion that is directed to the Blessed Mother, is of a different category to that which is shown the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. The saints are (rightly) revered with reverence and devotion, and Mary the greatest reverence and devotion. But worship and adoration are given to God alone. There is only a difference in *degree* between Mary and us. But there remains a difference in *kind* between Mary and Christ. In the same way, a difference of *degree* in the reverence and devotion between Mary and the saints. But a difference of kind between *reverence and honour* for Mary and *worship* for Christ. Likewise of their work, the work of intercession. Mary's intercession, the intercession of the saints, and the intercession of our friends who pray for us on earth are different only in *degree*. But there is difference in *kind* between Christ's unique work of intercession and any other. Ours - and Mary's - is *totally dependent on him*.

Devotion to Mary is meet and just. It *rightly* has a place in our life of faith. And rather than detracting from it or polluting it, devotion to her in fact fosters and purifies our worship of God. In other words, it is actually helpful, and in fact necessary. Mary helps us see Jesus better. A saint is like clear glass: they help us to see Christ. And as we have seen, Mary, *full of grace*, is the greatest of God's saints. In helping us to see Christ clearer, she helps us to worship God better. Amen.