

Sermon Feast of the Assumption 2022

One of the peculiar features of the contemporary church is a denial or at least a downgrading of those things which speak of the spiritual, the supernatural, and the miraculous. I have spoken about this before: the phenomenon of a church apologising for its belief in the miraculous; a faith nervous about the efficacy of prayer; a faith devoid of angels or demons; a church no longer convinced that God intervenes in the affairs of men. So often, instead, we find a church where the chief concerns and issues are worldly and secular. At the moment, you cannot get past the nave of Peterborough Cathedral without a ticket to see a display of plastic dinosaurs! We can only roll our eyes in disbelief... Sometimes the church is not much more than a prop to self-help, something to help us 'realise our potential'. Or else, it hurtles headlong in causes of social justice, striving to make 'the world a better place'. And other times what is offered is a vague sense of morality with a veneer of religiosity. Much of what passes for contemporary worship, you would be aware, reflects this. Much of it is dreary and pedestrian. It is robbed of almost all sense of the transcendent. It either takes its cues from the hollowness of contemporary pop culture, or it becomes a platform to express progressive ideals.

I should not need to remind you that such a church is a parody of the faith. It is not the church founded by Jesus Christ. This is a play church full of play Christians. Nothing pleases the devil more than for us to do his work for him. And what greater goal would the devil have than to convince Christians to dispense with belief in the supernatural and miraculous, to make our worship devoid of transcendence, and to make our commitment tame?

But on this feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we are reminded just exactly what is at stake. Mary, *'full of grace'* shows us the way to *fullness* of faith. And her timeless hymn of praise, the Magnificat, gives us an indication of what that fullness of faith looks like. But this feast is not simply an occasion to recall the great and godly example of the girl of Nazareth. We are certainly not meant to get lost in some superficial piety. And we do not just turn to Mary for an example of holiness and virtue. The first reading today from Revelation reminds us – and my goodness we need reminding! – that there is a battle going on! A spiritual battle going on about, above, and around us. And again, we do the devil's work for him we just dismiss this as some sort of silly fantasy.

There is a spiritual war going on about us. In his letter to the Ephesians Saint Paul tells us, *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.* This is serious business! But we do the devil's work if we remain indifferent to this reality, if we ignore it, downplay it, or dismiss it. In this spiritual battle, so often, when there is the fire of cannons about us, we hear fireworks instead. The clashing of swords we mistake for the rustle of leaves. Instead of rivers of blood, we see rainbows and sunshine. We say nothing to see here! In the words of the prophets, we cry *peace, peace, when there is no peace...*

The writer of Revelation knows what is at stake. We are presented today really with quite a terrifying image, of a dragon that seeks to devour the child born of the woman. Now, this part of Revelation is connected with the troubles of the church. Indeed, the whole of Revelation is written to a church facing persecution. So, the mysterious woman in this vision is understood as a symbol of the church, whether of the New Testament, or the Old and New Testament combined. In various places, the Old Testament presents Israel as a woman, even a woman in labour. But in what we hear today, we are confronted with the immense power of evil arrayed against the church, that is against those that bring Christ to birth. The dragon with seven heads suggests a creature of incredible vitality. It is hard to kill. Its seven crowns are a sign that it has sovereignty. The horn in the ancient world was a symbol of strength. So, the dragon with ten horns is a sign of *immense* strength. Evil is strong!! And opposition to the church on the part of evil is persistent. No sooner is it defeated in one place than it breaks out somewhere else. Remember, Satan was hostile to Christ from the very beginning. The story of Herod's seeking to kill all the infants in Bethlehem reminds us that evil sought to destroy him from the moment of his birth.

But Mary also needs to be read into this text from Revelation in the first and literal sense. A woman, in labour, giving birth to a son who is to rule the nations, must of course be read as the Blessed Mother. The Fathers of the church and later medieval commentators saw no issue in identifying the woman clothed in the sun, standing on the moon, with the twelve stars about her head as representing both the church *and* Mary. It should not surprise us that one image can speak of two truths, two realities at once. The biblical imagination is frequently able to hold distinct images together. And certainly, in the case of a vision such as we are dealing with here.

The woman is indeed the church. But Mary also *represents* the church. Mary is not just the individual mother of Jesus, she is also the *daughter of Zion*, the representative of all the people of God. One of Mary's most ancient titles is Mother of the Church. It makes perfect logical sense if we say the church is the body of Christ. Mary as Christ's mother is also the Church's mother, the body of Christ. And as all Christians are called to bear the Living Word within them, so Mary has preeminence in this, being the very first to literally do so. This is why there are forces arrayed to destroy us. Because we bear Christ, we carry his light and life into the world.

But we need to remember that even if the dragon seeks to destroy, even if it is tenacious, and wears seven crowns, the son born of the woman is destined to rule the world *with a rod of iron*. God is victorious! God exercises true and ultimate sovereignty. And God *has* defeated the devil, as the unfolding vision of Revelation is careful to stress. The point is further made with the vision from Revelation forming a sort of bookend to Genesis 3 and the account of the fall of man. The actors in these two chapters are the same: the woman, the dragon or serpent, and the male child. As such, Mary here then appears as the New Eve. And whereas in Genesis the serpent beguiles Eve, in Revelation the dragon is outwitted. Whereas Eve is banished from the Garden and her offspring cursed to labour and toil, the woman clothed with the sun is brought to a place of safety and her offspring to the very throne of God. The power of evil is terrifyingly real for believers. But this is *not* because it is triumphant. It is because he knows he is beaten, and that his time is short. So, we are meant to take heart! Let us willingly suffer for a while, because our ultimate triumph is sure.

There is a battle, and we are in the midst of it. The church is attacked on all sides. We need to wake up to this! We need to live our lives as if this were true! No more half-hearted commitments! No more of the silly substitutes which so often today pass for faith and commitment! Like Mary, we must bear Christ even through the cries and pain of labour, even at great risk to ourselves. We must bring him into the world, even though there are forces that seek to snatch him away. Like Mary, we must defy those forces. Because it is only by bearing Christ that we can share in the victory. Mary shows us quite simply the remedy to evil: *to say 'yes' to God*. Her *fiat* – let it be – is the greatest weapon at our disposal. Her obedience and humility reverses the sin of Eve – the pride – which opens us to the world of evil. Mary's total and willing assent to God is the only thing that brings true victory and true life. Amen.