

Sermon Feast of the Assumption 2024

On this wonderful feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary we are treated to a delight of beautiful hymns. The last hymn we will sing together today is the well-known and well loved ‘Tell out my Soul.’ Appropriate, as it is a poetic presentation of today’s gospel passage, the Magnificat, the Song of Mary. But also appropriate because (as noted in the pewsheet) the author the Rt Rev Timothy Dudley-Smith died this week at the grand age of 97. I was in the office when your service order was being prepared by Mark Thawley, and saw him add ‘2024’ next to his name. A sobering act, to be sure.

Dudley-Smith wrote the lyrics of some 400 hymns, among the most familiar of which are “Lord, for the years” (1967) and “Tell out, my soul” (1962). Who says at All Saints we are just stuck in the 16th century?! In the rush of church and liturgical reforms in the 1960s there much new and innovative church music. Most of it unremarkable and entirely forgettable. But also as noted in your pew bulletin today, poet laureate John Betjeman described Tell out my Soul as “one of the few modern hymns that will truly last”. I like to think that in small way we will help ensure that legacy. It is fitting that Tell out my Soul should be Dudley-Smith’s most well known and most enduring hymn. The Magnificat on which it is based is one of the most important texts of the entire New Testament. A text prayed every night at Evening Prayer. A text that has been one of the anchors of Christian prayer for centuries and inspired countless millions.

In reading – indeed praying – this portion of Luke’s gospel there is a sense that something new is emerging. Luke tells us how Mary – pregnant with the Christ Child, the promised Messiah - offers this hymn of praise during her visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Mary’s hymn conveys a sense of expectant joy. There is a great sense of anticipation in what she proclaims. And a great sense of hope that God will accomplish his divine plan. In her something new is being brought to birth, literally, in Christ. Something new will be brought to birth in the child she carries. In her something new will be born that upturns and disrupts not only his people of his time, but all people of all time. *He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty...* Or as Dudley-Smith memorably puts it: *Tell out my soul, the greatness of his might: powers and dominions lay their glory by; proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight, the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.*

Now, it common in some circles, (progressive, revisionist circles, mostly) to see the Magnificat as something akin to a proto-revolutionary text. (And by extension to see Mary as some sort of proto-Marxist!) The language of disruption and subversion, and of throwing down and turning upside down reflected in the Magnificat perhaps gives this idea some encouragement.

But the Christian must always be nervous at language of revolution. History shows us that revolutions are almost always born in violence and bloodshed, not the hope and joy Mary proposes. Revolution is a destruction of order, not merely a disruption. The language of the gospel, on the other hand, is not one of revolution. The language of the gospel is of *restoration*. The work of God in Jesus Christ – born of Mary – is a work of restoration. Christ restores what was lost. The new thing Mary senses and anticipates is a restoration of that state of union and communion with God which was his plan from the beginning.

The turning upside down of Mary's song in fact points us to a turning the right way up! Yes, in her a new thing is being brought to birth. In fact, it is a new creation. This is clearly a theme that captured the gospel imagination. St John reflects this in the majestic prologue to his gospel: *In the beginning was the Word...* of course, echoing the opening verses of Genesis. But the evangelist Mark, (as we have been hearing for most of this year) also opens his gospel: *The beginning (the 'genesis') of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God*. Likewise indicating that in Jesus a *new thing*, a new creation, is made manifest. Some weeks ago, we heard of Jesus' control over the wind and the waves. Yes, the story affirms the divinity of Christ: only God has mastery over the created order. But it also points us to the very substance of his mission and ministry: *the restoration of creation*. All the evangelists in various ways communicate the idea that in Jesus a new thing is being brought to birth. A new thing which restores the divine order.

And this trajectory, of course, uniquely, singularly and definitively perfected in the Resurrection. The Resurrection which opens for all humankind a share in what Saint Paul explicitly calls *the new creation*. In the epistle reading today Paul calls Christ the *first fruits of those who have fallen asleep*. He goes on to present the key parallel between Christ and Adam: *Just as in Adam all, die, so in Christ all shall be made alive*. This has given rise to an idea developed elsewhere by Paul of Christ as the Second Adam, or the Last Adam. Christ *restoring* what was lost in Adam.

Without too much of an imaginative stretch at all, by the 2nd century the church Fathers were applying the title the Second Eve or the New Eve to the Blessed Virgin Mary. But even as they were extending this honour - this title – to her, it reminds us that her glory is only a reflected glory. Her glory is that of the relation between the sun and the moon. The light of the moon is only reflected light. Whatever we say about Mary is dependent on what we say about Christ. Any honour we pay her is honour we pay to Christ. And to withhold honour to her is to withhold honour to Christ. Any properly ordered Mariological statement is by necessity a Christological statement.

As the New Eve, Mary shares in the fulfilment of the very first biblical prophecy. God saying to the serpent in the Garden: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall crush your head, and you shall bruise his heel.* This little passage is known as the *protoevangelium*, the ‘first gospel’: the announcement of the Messiah and Redeemer, and of a battle between the woman and the serpent. Mary reverses Eve’s disobedience with her obedience. Where Eve said, ‘no’, Mary says ‘yes’. Where Eve’s faith failed Mary stood firm. In the 2nd century St Irenaeus already said, ‘The knot of Eve’s disobedience was untied by Mary’s obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her unbelief the virgin Mary loosened by her faith.’ A turning upside down. A reversal so to restore...

The classic depiction of Our Lady of Walsingham – placed before us here for our devotion today – is correct. What we see presented here reflects the true faith about her. The honour paid her is never in isolation. It is always in reference to the Son she has borne. Here we see her in the *presence* of her Son. What’s more, she *points to him*. She directs our attention to him. It is right and just, then, as catholic Christians, to give Mary honour. We might be nervous, unsure, weighed down by 500 years of prejudice and misunderstanding about her. So remember, that as Mother of Christ she is mother of the church, his living Body. And as mother of the church, she is mother of us all.

Like Mary, our entire lives, as faithful, sincere believers, are to be directed to her Son. Because (and I’m sorry to break it to you if you don’t already know!) the Christian life is not about us! We are a pathetic and poor substitute for any honour or attention. Our life as Christians only has meaning if they are directed to Christ. The life, the witness, the mission of the church only has value if they are directed to the new life *he* offers. Without hesitation we can look to Mary as the model for Christian life. And aided by her prayers and encouraged by her example we too can tell out the good news of the new creation. Amen.