

### **Sermon Feast of the Assumption 2023**

In June and July 431 a group of bishops met in the city of Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) for a church council. The city already had had long associations with the church. In about 52-54 AD Saint Paul had in fact made the city his base for part of his missionary activity, initially operating out of the local synagogue. At this time the city was already about 1000 years old. When imprisoned in Rome, Paul was to write a letter to this church, preserved of course in our New Testament. The church at Ephesus was the first of the seven churches addressed by John in the Revelation. And in the Book of Acts, we hear of a silversmith named Demetrios who stirred up a mob against Paul, saying that he was endangering the livelihood of those making silver shrines to the pagan goddess Artemis. It was the cult of this goddess that was such a prominent feature of life in the city. You might remember from your school days that one of the seven wonders of the ancient world was in fact the temple of Artemis at Ephesus.

The council of 431 was not the first time that a major meeting of leaders of the church had been summoned. From time-to-time local councils had been convened to settle local issues. The church in fact has employed councils from the very start, again as we hear in the Book of Acts, concerning the so-called Council of Jerusalem. But as the church expanded, a more inclusive way of settling matters of universal significance was required. They became known as ‘ecumenical councils’, or ‘general’ councils because they drew participants from the whole church, and their rulings applied to the whole church. For this reason, they are generally accepted by the churches both East and West. The catalyst for such councils would be a matter of faith or discipline that was being contested. Oftentimes they responded to a certain heresy that had crept into the church. By examining the scriptural record, traditional faith, and examining lived experience, a response would be discerned. And it is in large measure the discernment of these councils that we claim as orthodox faith. It is important to add that the ecumenical councils never sought to *add* to the faith, merely to *clarify* the faith.

Before 431 there had been two ecumenical councils examining two key issues. The most important of these was the Council of Nicaea in 325. Here, the divinity of Christ was definitively declared resulting in the formula that Christ was of the same substance with the Father. We have just recited the Nicene Creed, the living fruit of that council. It’s good to remind ourselves that since 325 – very nearly 1700 years – Christians have been reciting this creed as a standard and measure of orthodoxy.

The second ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381 again battled the vestiges of Arianism and semi-Arianism, and reaffirmed Nicaea's rulings. This council also condemned the heresies of Sabellius (who rejected the Persons of the Trinity), and Apollinarius (who denied the full humanity of Christ). But perhaps most significantly this council clearly defined the Divinity of the Holy Spirit.

At Ephesus, the presenting issue up for debate was the appropriateness or not of applying the title *Mother of God* to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The bishops gathered in a great church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Not coincidentally, the city (according to some traditions) was the place where Mary, under the care of John the apostle, lived out her final days and had in fact died. And it would seem that Christian devotion to the blessed mother was an important platform in displacing and dismantling the pagan cult of Artemis.

Well, a bishop called Nestorius claimed that the title of Mother of God *was not* appropriate. She might, he argued, rightly be called Christ-bearer (*Christotokos*, in the Greek), but not God-bearer (*Theotokos*). Now, Nestorius was not a marginal, footnote figure. He was the patriarch of Constantinople when that city was the most significant in the known world. What the patriarch said there had impact on the whole church. It provides an important example that we cannot always trust what our bishops say to us! They too can get it disastrously wrong, and can come close to leading the whole church to ruin! Even what bishops say must be interrogated...

Now, behind most of the classic heresies is a half-truth. And it was Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria and Nestorius' chief opponent who recognised this. Cyril's essential insight was that yes, of course, Mary is the mother of Christ. Of course, this is true! It is true, *but it is not enough!*

And is this not precisely what happens so often in our life of faith, both communally and certainly individually? We get to a certain point, and we then step back. We come close, but then hesitate. Whether this be in our belonging or our commitment or our assent to various articles of faith, we give ourselves over to a certain degree, but when faced with *the full implications* we stop and step back. But if Christ is true, and if what the church proclaims about him is true, then that changes everything. The implications of Christian faith are radical and complete. And Nestorius steps back from that. He hesitates before the full implications of the Incarnation, of the Word made flesh.

Importantly, Cyril and the council fathers recognized that the issue they faced was not so much a Mariological one as a Christological one. In other words, to declare Mary as Mother of God does not come from an outpouring of misguided devotion to Mary. It comes from a properly ordered understanding of *who Christ is*. To say the correct things about Jesus we need to say the correct things about his mother. Mother of God, then is a *technical* term. It is a term of *precision*. In fact, it is a *necessary term* if we are to accept the full and radical implications of Jesus being *truly divine*.

Now, I take time with all of this to remind us all that we do not live in an historic vacuum! The faith we profess and proclaim was not articulated five minutes ago! And so, whatever lingering hesitation or squeamishness some Anglicans might have about the title Mother of God should immediately be put to one side! The Articles of Religion, - one of the guiding formularies of our church - says the councils of the church should only be heeded if *it may be declared that they be taken out of holy Scripture (XXI)*. And that is most certainly what we have here. In the simple logic that if Mary is the mother of Jesus (as she most certainly is) and if Jesus is *truly divine* (as he certainly is) and both of these are argued from scripture (as they are) then there can be *no hesitation* in calling Mary Mother of God. This title of honour is not a vain invention. It is not in disagreement with scripture. It is, in fact, *a necessary title*.

Anglicans have always given preeminence to the ‘primitive, undivided Church’. This largely amounts to the first *seven* ecumenical councils. (Remember, Ephesus was only the third!) In the canons of 1571, bishops and priests of our Church were directed to “*teach nothing which you would have religiously held and believed by the people, save what is agreeable to the teaching of the Old or New Testament, and what the Catholic and ancient bishops have collected from this self-same doctrine.*” Anglicans, then, can be confident of robust, full, expansive Marian theology and devotion drawn from the fathers. Before 431 there had already been *centuries* of prolonged reflection on the role and legacy of Mary. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, and Augustine, all add to it and *all* part of our heritage. So let us hear none of the persistent nonsense that devotion to Mary does not belong to our church. Yes, we seek a faith that is full and properly ordered. But this is *not possible* if we reject, ignore, or even denigrate the Blessed Mother. Mary is not alien to our church. She belongs to us all. And far from detracting from Christ, she can only - and rightly - direct us to him. Amen.