

Sermon for the Feast of the Assumption Year A 2017

Today, Holy Church gives us opportunity to celebrate the life, work and witness of the blessed Mother. We are reminded that love of Mary – true devotion to her – always forms heart of authentic, catholic faith. But even as the fullness of faith always depends on Mary to take her part, she also shows us what it means *to live* that fullness of faith. The Church rightly asserts that Mary lived the ‘big’ human life. Indeed, hers was the ‘biggest’ any human ever lived. She is a model of faith and inspiration because she met - head on - the challenges of her particular circumstances. Despite the popular images of Mary - surrounded by saints and angels, the glowing halo, the sweetly smile - we must not imagine for a minute it was easy for her. Her life was surely marked by gossip, scandal, misunderstanding, confusion, fear and violence.

But looking at her life there is a sense that once that initial consent to God was given there was no turning back. Her ‘yes’ to God was complete and absolute. The faith that was borne in her took shape in her, not only in the Word who became flesh, but in her very life as well. Her faith became total, complete. It shaped the direction of her whole life. And so, we hear of Mary not only at the birth of her divine son, but reappearing throughout his public ministry, at Cana, at the foot of the cross, and finally in the upper room at Pentecost. Of course, authentic faith is only and ever directed toward Christ. It is this faith which we celebrate today: Mary who held nothing back, who gave her whole life to Christ and who, according to the most ancient of traditions, was assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven, thereby anticipating the life of glory for *all* who follow Christ. The Scriptures show us a woman who gives her all to God. In her ‘Yes’ she offers us a model of a big faith, a full faith.

It has been one of the greatest errors of recent times to buy into the idea that commitment, demands and discipline are incompatible with contemporary expressions of faith. Instead what has been offered are tame, domestic, small expressions of faith. The experiment, we might say, has failed. It is when we ask a lot that we get something lasting and of value back. It is when we propose the faith as something large, something big, something demanding that people will commit to it. Because, quite simply, a small and undemanding faith, a faith which simply echoes the values and moral and beliefs of the world back to itself is not a faith worth believing in. As followers of Jesus we must insist there is a faith worth believing in; it is a faith which is beautiful and good and true; it is a faith which reveals the destiny of all humankind; a faith which calls the very best out of us. It is also a demanding faith. But these demands have its own strange attraction. It is from Mary’s own life of faith, we see something of that ‘big’ faith, the faith worth believing in.

Firstly, a big faith, a full faith, a faith worth believing in is a faith of sacrifice. If someone imagines that being a follower of Jesus is a cosy, easy, genteel affair clearly has never read or taken the Gospels seriously. Sacrifice lay at its heart. From John’s Gospel, we see Mary at the foot of her son’s cross. If we doubt the true cost and pain of discipleship consider also the image of the beast pursuing the woman in the first reading from Revelations. To carry the Word and to bear his light is to set ourselves up as a target for opposition and struggle. We must not be surprised when things get difficult. Indeed, we should expect it.

Secondly, a big faith, a full faith, a faith worth believing in is a faith of obedience. We remember Mary's own words at Cana, *do whatever he tells you*. Not, *do whatever you think is good idea*. Not, *do whatever you like*. But, *Do whatever he tells you!* The world we inhabit values individualism and personal choice almost above every other conceivable value. This is at the heart of the key ethical struggles the church is now engaged in. Obedience is hard! Free thinking and self-expression rule the day. But if we do want to take seriously a 'big' faith - a challenging faith - then we have to call the bluff! It is easy to believe in yourself! It is easy to go along with whatever the intellectual elite tell us in vogue. We will need courage to recognise the sham, the deception of the idea that I have the answer and that my personal choice is the way to freedom and happiness. Because they are not!! But humble submission to the wisdom of the church, availing to ourselves to the graces of the sacraments and faithfully adhering to the teachings of Scripture will free us from ourselves.

Finally, a big faith, a full faith, a faith worth believing in is generous and joyful. The Magnificat - that spontaneous and overflowing response of joy flowing out of Mary - surely points us towards this. Faith is a marvellous thing! It is worth being joyous about! It is worth celebrating! Now Christians can be pretty expert at being miserable. And it must be said certain sections of Anglicanism can be even more expert at being miserable. We can very easily be angry with the church, angry with the world; always looking to pick a fight; imagining ourselves to be the one and only guardians of a pure, unspoilt religion. But a bitter, isolating, grumpiness surely does not reflect the lively, joyous and expansive gospel of Jesus Christ. A big faith, a full faith, will see us generous, too, not just in attitude but in time, money and talents. Christ wants all of us! Not just the conveniently sliced off 'religious' parts of us. And we need, also, to be generous with each others' faults and failings...

Mary shows us what a big faith may look like. There is a place in our world for big faith. Indeed, this is what people cry out for and it is what the church at its best offers. Part of the difficulty the church now finds itself in is that so often we have not offered much of anything big. We have failed to propose the faith as something that might ignite the religious imagination, and capture all that we are, the wholeness of our lives. At times, it seems we have been embarrassed about making demands, stepping back from insisting that to be faithful to Jesus requires sacrifice, obedience, joy and generosity. Without a bold, big, confident faith Christianity becomes insipid, uninspiring and – frankly - pointless.

My brothers and sisters, a faith that does not inspire us to greatness is not a faith worth bothering with. But the good news of God in Jesus Christ *is* worth believing in, is worth committing to, and is worth sharing. The faith of Jesus Christ deserves not only the best we can give, but everything we can give.

Mary shows us what this big, demanding and ultimately life-giving faith looks like. God has affirmed her gift and her generosity by crowning her with the life of glory. May Mary, mother of the church and mother of us all, give us the grace the strength and the courage. Amen.