

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Little Johnny and his family were having Sunday dinner at his Grandmother's house... Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. When Little Johnny received his plate, he started eating right away. 'Johnny! Please wait until we say our prayer,' said his mother. 'I don't need to,' the boy replied... 'Of course, you do,' his mother insisted. 'We always say a prayer before eating at our house.' 'That's at our house,' Johnny explained. 'But this is Grandma's house and she knows how to cook!'

In all the excitement of our lives, all the things in store, all the wonderful ideas we have for moving things forward, it is all too easy for us to get carried away just like little Johnny, and want to receive the rewards without laying the necessary foundations. As Christians, it is important that before we eat, we pray, because saying thank you to God for His gift of food helps us to grow in gratitude and makes it all the more delicious as we receive it. There is no physical reason why we should do this, but spiritually it transforms our inner being and our outlook.

Yesterday was the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. So that we don't miss it, we are celebrating it today. Two of the churches in our benefice hold the Blessed Virgin as their Patron, both Edwardstone and Boxford. The Feast of the Assumption calls us to rejoice that the Mother of our Lord assumes her rightful place at her son's side in Heaven. Now, the precise nature of Mary's raising to glory has been the subject of much theological debate down the ages. But this morning, you will be glad to hear that I will not attempt to answer questions about how exactly her bodily form may have been raised to the side of her beloved Son. Such things are for God alone to know. To your relief and mine, I shan't attempt to teach you a

physics or chemistry lesson. No. To do so would be to miss the point entirely.

It would lead us down the road of obsessing about process, rather than admiring the person of Mary and lifting our eyes to heaven. In our materially obsessed world, there are strong forces which encourage us to focus on the empirical and worldly at the expense of the spiritual. But to do so hinders our ability to see the wider truth. As Christians, we must always resist the temptation to hold material truth in higher regard than spiritual truth.

So today is about the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary and how her moral and philosophical integrity leads us into greater spiritual depth. That's where our focus will be.

From this day all generations will call me blessed.

This is a very familiar line from the Magnificat, the Song of Mary found in Luke's Gospel. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, when the Angel Gabriel visits Mary, she is terrified, but obedient and faithful none-the-less. I don't know about you, but I often pray that I may be a tiny bit as faithful as Mary during difficult times – especially times when God is trying to lead me in a direction I am not sure I want to go. Sometimes, I find myself wanting to run away instead of going where he leads How about you?

Mary could easily have done just that, but instead she shows a remarkable amount of trust and maturity in her response to being told she is going to become the mother of the Messiah, God's own Son - daunting to say the least.

You'll recall how Mary's song of praise begins with her cousin, Elizabeth, calling her "the mother of my Lord". At that moment the earlier message of the angel takes on a meaningful living shape. Suddenly Mary sees a vision of what she must become and her future begins to take a more

identifiable form. So Mary, obedient, prayerful, faithful, can't help but glorify her Lord! She sings of the all-excelling perfections of God; his power, his holiness, his mercy and his faithfulness.

The Magnificat, or the Song of Mary as it is often known, is almost wholly comprised of Old Testament quotations, but the whole hymn is inspired by Mary's promised Son, who is to be the Messiah, to whom all those scriptures proclaim and point.

The Jews understood that the Messiah would bring in a new realm as foretold in Isaiah chapter 61. Mary repeats this prophecy in her song of praise: Her son would bring a time of massive political reordering and social upheaval. The hungry would be filled with good things, and the rich would be sent away empty. The proud would receive their comeuppance and the humble would have their day in the sun! This affords us a glimpse of what heavenly values look like and they are spoken by Mary before her son is even born.

Elizabeth refers to Mary as 'blessed' three times in just four verses. St Luke uses two Greek words here¹ — but their meaning is essentially the same. The latter word, makarios, is the same one which Mary uses in the Magnificat - From now on all generations will call me (makarios) blessed.

Makarios means happy. But not a superficial, fluffy, short-lived pleasure, as we use the English word 'happy' today. Makarios is the deep religious joy of a person who has a share in divinely-given salvation; a peace, blessedness, that transforms their very being into a peacemaker – one whose whole being is now in tune with God and will not do anything that hinders his love transforming our world.

This is the key to understanding Mary's blessedness. She has a vital and indispensable role to play in God's plan for the history of the world.

¹ eulogemene and makarios

In our first reading from Revelation chapter 12, we heard about the image of the pregnant woman. 'She is clothed with the sun. The moon is under her feet, and she is crowned with twelve stars. She gives birth to a male child whose destiny is to rule the nations'. Now the imagery of the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, is notoriously challenging to interpret, but our lectionary chooses this passage for us to use on Mary's feast day for good reason. The Saviour, as we see him in the person of Christ, is clearly the Redeemer of the whole world— he who Revelation calls 'the ruler of the nations'. His mother, Mary, is the pregnant woman described in Revelation as 'the Queen of Heaven', with moon under her feet and crowned with 12 stars.

As with all the saints, we must remember, however, that every feast of Mary is also a feast of Jesus. The Saints point to Jesus, just like scripture and worship always point to Jesus. Through them we see kingdom values breaking through. Mary is blessed because she is the mother of Jesus, and the saints in heaven are blessed, precisely because of their devotion and relationship to Him. They each point us towards our Blessed Saviour, and not just to themselves alone.

Now you will remember I reflected at the beginning on the need to be open to spiritual as much as material truths. What we have just discussed certainly registers on the spiritual end of the spectrum as well as the material, and such spiritual truths are important to our Christian journey. Here is an example as to why:

Maximilian Kolbe, was a Polish Franciscan friar of the early twentieth century. Kolbe was active in promoting the veneration of Mary, and founding and supervising a monastery near Warsaw. Kolbe saw in Mary, as with Jesus, an example of obedience, bravery, self-sacrifice and loyalty that stood as an example for all Christians to follow.

Early on in the Second World War, Nazi occupiers closed his monastery and placed Kolbe and some of his brothers into a concentration camp, as a result of Kolbe's refusal to recognise Nazi Authority. Soon they were transferred to Auschwitz.

Continuing to act as a priest, Kolbe was subjected to violent harassment, including beating and lashings, and once had to be smuggled to a prison hospital by friendly inmates. At the end of July 1941, three prisoners disappeared from the camp, prompting the deputy camp commander to pick 10 men to be starved to death in an underground bunker to deter further escape attempts. When one of the selected men cried out, "My wife! My children!", Kolbe stepped forward and volunteered to take his place.

According to the eye witness testimony of an assistant janitor at that time, Kolbe regularly led all 10 prisoners in prayer to Jesus and salutation to Mary. Each time the guards checked on him, he was standing or kneeling in the middle of the bunker and looking calmly at those who entered. After two weeks of dehydration and complete starvation, only Kolbe remained alive. The guards wanted the bunker emptied, so they gave Kolbe a lethal injection of carbolic acid. Kolbe is said to have raised his left arm and calmly waited for the deadly injection. Rather fittingly, his remains were cremated on 15 August, the feast day of the Assumption of Mary.

It is undeniable, that for Kolbe, it was his devotion to Christ and his intimacy to Mary that gave him his courage and composure when it really mattered. Mary stands as an example and aid to each of us too. For she is mother of our Saviour, Jesus Christ and the body of all who are saved in her son. Amen

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