

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
(Apocalypse: 11:19;12:1-6.10 / Luke 1:39-56)  
15.08.2018

In our first reading from the Book of the Apocalypse John shares with us his vision into heaven; he tells us what he was given to see: *The sanctuary of God in heaven opened and the ark of the covenant could be seen inside it.*

You will remember how in chapter 7 of the Acts of the Apostles a similar insight was given to Stephen at the moment of his martyrdom: *Stephen saw heaven opened with Christ standing there at God's right hand.*

The notion of *heaven thrown open* is found in yet other places in both the Old and New Testaments.

In Genesis Jacob had a dream in which *he saw heaven opened*. Therein we read: *And behold a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven and behold the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. At the top of the ladder stood the Lord Himself.*

In the gospel according to John we read how Jesus proclaimed in the context of His encounter with Nathanael at the moment of that disciple's calling: *Truly, truly, I say to you, You shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.* Still other texts which speak of heaven being opened spring to mind, but let the examples given suffice to make our point.

I believe we can read into all these texts a call addressed to each one of us: the call to live one day where God lives. That, of course, is at the heart of the mystery we celebrate today by our commemoration of Mary's glorious Assumption.

We are told in the Apocalypse text read this morning what John saw in his glimpse into heaven opened was the *ark of the covenant*.

You may remember that among the many titles given to Mary is the title *Ark of the Covenant*. I can recall how that appellation – among the many other poetic Old Testament titles given to Mary – used to intrigue me as a child when I would visit the chapel of the Poor Clare Convent in Belfast each evening of the months of May and October and hear the nuns rhyming off the Litany of Loretto.

Why is Mary referred to as *Ark of the Covenant*?

What was the ark of the covenant? What did it signify?

The ark of the covenant signified what I experienced praying in that convent chapel: the presence of God with His people!

In a certain sense, we could say that the ark of the covenant bore the Lord's very presence in the midst of His Chosen People.

In light of this, we can see how Church tradition was led to hail Mary – the Christ-bearer – giving her the title *Ark of the Covenant*.

The Annunciation and Visitation gospel scenes come to mind at this point. Let's just look at them for an instant.

In the Annunciation gospel Mary is greeted by the archangel Gabriel with these words of salutation: *The Lord is with you.*

In the Visitation gospel, as she enters into Zechariah's house, Mary is greeted by Elizabeth as the one who has borne the Lord Himself into that household. Moreover, John the Baptist leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb as he hears Mary's greeting. We are reminded of an

ecstatic David dancing before the ark of the covenant, leaping for joy before the sign of the Lord's presence in the midst of His Chosen People.

The Annunciation gospel depicts Mary setting out immediately on a journey: *Mary went as quickly as she could to visit her cousin Elizabeth and offer her help.* The Visitation gospel sees her reach that journey's end when she enters into Zechariah's house.

The journey theme introduced in both gospel texts I've referred to is so important to the whole of the story of God's dealings with His People.

The ark of the covenant journeyed with the People of God as they trekked their desert pilgrim way, right up until it was carried into the Temple that had been built to house this *singular vessel of devotion* – to evoke yet another title given to Mary in that prayer of litany which came to mind as I set about considering with you the special significance of today's Solemnity.

In John's vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, the visionary was given to contemplate the ark of the covenant in heaven.

Given the tradition of the Church, the choice of biblical text used for today's liturgy, points us in the direction of Mary assumed into heaven.

What the liturgy is hinting at is a belief of the Church which, from earliest times, came to understand what we might think of as, what I call, *a complete Mary now living fully in God's presence.* This belief developed over the centuries; it came to a culminating point in the dogmatic definition which states *Mary was assumed into heaven at the end of her earthly life.* This same mystery is referred to by our Orthodox brothers and sisters as her *Mary's Dormition.*

The dogmatic definition of the Assumption speaks to us of Mary having *passed over* to be in and with Christ, where she now shares in His Risen glory.

It is a mystery which would have us think of our call to share in Christ's glory. *Where Christ has gone we are all called to follow.* Mary has preceded us on that journey. She has found her *true life, risen with Christ, now hidden with Christ in God.*

Along with Pius XII's dogmatic proclamation of the Assumption, I find myself led to think of some very significant Marian declarations made in the famous *Puebla Document* born of the Latin American Bishops' Conference in 1979.

The *Puebla Document*, rooted in the reflections of the Second Vatican Council, speaks of Mary, above all, as *a sign of hope.* It states: *Mary is a sign of hope for all the poor and all those who join themselves in solidarity with the poor.* It speaks of how *in the glorious body of Mary the material creation begins to have its part in the Risen body of Christ.* *Mary assumed into heaven in her human completeness body and soul* now lives what we are all called to live according to the Scriptures: she reigns with Christ in heaven.

Living now with and in her Divine Son, Mary has entered into Christ's own prayer of intercession for God's People who pursue the paths of history.

In the words of Victor Cordina: *The Assumption of Mary is participation in the glorious victory of the Resurrection of Jesus, the triumph of divine justice over human injustice.*

Cordina sees Mary as one close to the people in his contemplation. Let me quote him again: *She – who had given birth to the Son of God near a manger, whose heart had been pierced by swords of sorrow, who suffered the first persecutions with the Apostolic Church – was, after a humble and unknown death, assumed into heaven.* Cordina definitely does not see Mary as one cut-off from the harsh realities of life by her exaltation to be near her Risen Son in the mystery of her Assumption. I quote him one final time: *The Assumption is the glorious*

*culmination of the mysterious predilection of God for the poor, for the little ones of this world – a sign of hope!*

The teaching of the Church at the Second Vatican Council is reflected in today's liturgy. In the Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium* – the document which speaks of Mary in a final chapter – it is said that Mary is *the sure sign of hope for the Faithful People of God*. This thought is echoed in the Church's liturgical prayer. Listen out for it in the texts you will hear proclaimed or sung.

We are called in the liturgy of this day to *hope in the Lord*; to *hope in glory* for ourselves.

The Apostle Paul encourages us especially in this regard.

Our celebration should lead us not only to reflect upon this call, but, ultimately, to enter into it! We are called today to enter into *hope against all hope*.

The theme of hope is one dear to our monastic family wherein we like to call Mary the *Mother of Holy Hope*.

Mary believed the angel's promise: *nothing is impossible to God*. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is the accomplishment of that promise.

It is for our encouragement that the Church has us honour Mary today – not as one elevated above us, but simply as one who has gone ahead of us.

The gospel text is filled with hope.

According to Pope Francis the *Magnificat* is *the Song of the People of God walking through history: It is not only the Song of Mary, but of many saints, men and women, some famous, others unknown to us, but known to God... mums, dads, catechists, missionaries, priests, Sisters, young people, even children and grandparents who have faced the struggles of life, carrying in their heart the hope of the little and the humble*.

Pope Francis encourages us to dare to make this *Song of Hope* ours as we gaze honestly at our lives and look from where we are and what we are living to the loving mercy of the heart of our God for each one of us.

I quote Pope Francis again: *Holy Church honours with special love the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, who is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son. In her the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of the Resurrection and joyfully contemplates as in a faultless model that which she herself wholly desires and hopes to be*.

I am confident that we can all find consolation in the thought that in the *Magnificat* we are given to intone (a song that has been put to so many melodies and settings over the centuries, from the most elaborate and sublime to the simplest and most banal) we are given a prayer which is nothing less than a *song of praise of our God*, to quote the psalmist.

The *Magnificat* is a song which the Lord Himself has placed in our hearts and puts upon our lips to lift us up from our sorrows and distress, precisely by having us extol the Lord for all His great goodness to us. In echoing Mary's *Magnificat* we stand in continuity with Hannah, Isaiah and the prophets of the Old Testament and also with the Beatitudes of Jesus in the New Testament. We sing of a God who is merciful and compassionate, One who will feed the hungry, give to the poor, care for the needy, lift up the lowly. We sing this God-inspired song remembering also the powerful and the rich, the proud hearted and the self-satisfied – all who do not recognise their need of God. For these latter ones also we plead the Lord's intervention, imploring that they may come to see the tender mercy and loving kindness of our God who rejects no one and longs for the salvation of all.

In inviting us to look to Mary on this day when we celebrate her feast, what the Church is addressing to us as an invitation is summed up for us in the teaching of Vatican II in the Council's teaching document on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium: In (Mary) the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of the redemption, and joyfully contemplates (...) that which she herself wholly desires and hopes to be.*

We might ask ourselves just what that means for us.

Do we well and truly *wholly desire and hope to be* where Christ lives – where Mary has gone before us? Do we *wholly desire and hope* that our lives may be *risen lives, hidden with Christ in God*?

This morning we could all make our own these words of Pierre-Marie Dumont: *What joy to contemplate the triumph of our little sister in humanity, (Mary) crowned Queen of Angels! And what cause for hope! For, in our own modest way, we too, through the grace of our baptism and our faithfulness, are promised to be received as kings and queens in the highest heavens.*

Let us end our meditation where we began it – looking with John into the heavenly realms, into which he was accorded insight. As we look to that place of glory to which we are all invited, let us hear these words which emanate from within that place of fullness of life: *Thus said the Alpha and the Omega, He who knew death and who is Life itself: 'Even if you have to die, keep faithful, and I will give you the crown of life'.*

Amen!