

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(Apocalypse 11:19; 12:1-6. 10 / Luke 1:39-56)
15.08.2017

In today's first reading we heard the visionary of the Book of Revelation share his insights with us:

The sanctuary of God in heaven opened, and the ark of the covenant could be seen inside it. Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman adorned with the sun, standing on the moon, adorned with twelve stars on her head for a crown. She was pregnant and in labour, crying aloud in the pangs of childbirth ... At this point the visionary goes on to share with us that he also saw a dragon who wanted to take the child's life: *The dragon stopped in front of the woman as she was having the child, so that he could eat it as soon as it was born from its mother.* John tells us something more about the identity of the child to whom the woman gave birth. He goes on to record: *The woman brought forth a male child into the world, the son who was to rule all the nations.* Despite the attacks on the life of the child whom John saw come to birth in his vision, ultimately he is given to hear a positive cry from heaven. The words the Apocalypse hears are a proclamation of God's triumph: *Victory and power and empire for ever have been won by our God, and all authority for his Christ.*

In my reflection this morning, I invite you to look into John's vision with me to consider what it might have to say to us today.

Now a great sign appeared in heaven. Catholic tradition has seen *the woman adorned with the sun, standing on the moon with a crown of twelve stars on her head*, as a reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary, gloriously assumed into heaven and crowned there as Queen. The Church's liturgical prayer certainly implies this. Various Marian antiphons and prayer formulae suggest this as an interpretation of the text of the Book of Revelation. I am not going to claim that such was the original understanding of the visionary of the Book of the Apocalypse when he was given the glimpse of this woman he saw in his vision; nor am I going to say that it was ever his intention that his lectors of a later date would immediately be led to think in the way the Church has done. John would certainly not have had Mary's Assumption or her Crowning as Queen of Heaven in mind when he recorded his words, nor would he have expected later generations to interpret what he confided to writing in this way. Nonetheless, a venerable tradition of the Church has given such interpretations to this text morning's text – and it has done so for centuries.

Whatever John himself understood when he confided his vision to writing drawing attention to the adornment of the woman, it seems clearer to me that when John spoke of this woman giving *birth to a son* he was undoubtedly presenting us with a graphical depiction of the birth of Christ. I would like to look at this second part of the vision now a little more closely. I believe that we can say that this part of the text hints at something we will have all verified for ourselves so often in our own life experiences: namely, Satan's opposition to the birth of Christ into this world... Satan's opposition to the coming of Christ in our own individual existences. I am thinking of the *dragon ready to devour* when I say this. And, in saying that, I am led to recall those other well-known words from the epistle of Peter – words with which many of you will be familiar – which speak of the one the apostle calls *the Enemy* or *the Evil One* or *Satan* depicting him as *a roaming lion on the prowl looking for someone upon whom to pounce with a view to devouring them.*

Let's face it, do we not all experience over and over again in our lives what could only be called onslaughts of the Evil One? These attacks are all those negative forces we encounter

within ourselves as well as all around us: the thought patterns and actions which seek to abort and/or devour the new life of Christ which is continually being conceived in our hearts and which wants to emerge from deep within us in order to reach out through us to those around us for their benefit as much as for our own.

I've already said that the son born to the woman in John's vision has us think of the child Jesus to whom Mary gave birth. Let us consider Christ's mission at this point. The Messiah born of Mary came into this world to implement God's plan of salvation. The gospels bear testimony to this. Jesus' own inaugural message in the Synagogue of Nazareth recorded for us in chapter 4 of Luke's gospel makes it abundantly clear that at the heart of Christ's own self-understanding was His sense of having been sent to redeem, save, and restore our fallen, wounded, captive humanity. Jesus pursues His mission in the world in this respect still today and He will continue to do so until the end of time. Jesus continues to seek us out to redeem, save and restore the fallen, wounded, enslaved person each one of us is. While the desire in Christ's heart is to set us free – and our own deepest longing is surely to know liberty from all that oppresses us – is it not also true to say that we experience a mysterious resistance, an opposition, to the Lord's saving grace in our lives? This resistance and opposition come at us both from forces within ourselves and from forces beyond us.

Let's stay with John's vision of *the woman in the pangs of childbirth*. This woman in the Book of the Apocalypse has me think of what we are told was said to Eve in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis. You will remember that she was given the promise after the Fall that she would crush and destroy the life-threatening serpent's head. It is implied that thus would begin the restoration of fallen creation. This woman's gesture the Church's tradition has seen as having occurred when Mary as the New Eve, gave birth to Jesus – *the One who saves*. She is said to have crushed Satan's head. Christian iconography depicts this scene for us often. I alluded to the Book of Genesis just a moment ago. Again and again I find myself coming back to the first chapters of this *Book of Origins* bearing in mind an insight I was given when I was about twelve years of age. I have never forgotten words spoken to me then by a Cistercian abbot when he said that I should always remember that the first chapters of the Book of Genesis are a key to understanding the whole of the Bible. He claimed – and I have come to agree with him on this – in a certain way, we could say that the whole of the Bible's teaching is to be found in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. For me, life experience bears out the truth of this rather audacious statement. Again and again I find my life experience illustrates what the first chapters of Genesis imply. Namely, life has been given to us as God's great gift and this life is continually being renewed in us; it is constantly bearing new shoots, but it is also so frequently under threat and constantly menaced. The enemy is forever trying to disturb God's life in us; the enemy is continually seeking to disrupt that deep inner harmony that God wills for our lives and which He so ardently longs to see us enjoy. And the enemy we speak of there, the biggest enemy with whom most of us are confronted, is none other than our self. Would it not be fair to say that all too often we allow our hearts to become perturbed and divided? How readily we are inclined to give into all sorts of doubts and fall prey to our multiple passions – so many attitudes and actions that destabilise our lives and throw us off balance. We are inclined to be our own worst enemies.

This is where I see today's first reading read in the light of the Church's tradition – which sees it as a depiction of Christ's birth from Mary – coming into play. John's vision opens up for us a message we all need to hear. The insight that the visionary of the Book of the Apocalypse shares with us is that Jesus was born of Mary in order to rescue us from the

effects of sin which have wounded and broken our hearts and which we allow to hold us captive in so many ways. The text from Revelation shows us that Satan did all he could – and that he still does all he can – to destroy the infant Saviour and the manifestations of God’s new life within us. (St Matthew’s gospel bears witness to this in its Infancy Narrative with the story of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents – whether we regard this story as referring to an historical event or not.) But, despite Satan’s efforts, victory has been won over the powers of sin and death by the Risen Christ. This is the bottom line of today’s first reading and it is the proclamation of hope we should open the ears of our hearts to hear and welcome today. What Christ’s resurrection victory shows us is that in the Risen Jesus, in the end, life is stronger than death. This is what John heard being shouted in the heavens, is it not? *Victory and power and empire for ever have been won by our God and all authority for His Christ.*

When the Church humbly asks us to dare to believe in and contemplate what it calls the *extraordinary grace accorded to Mary by her Saviour God* by her Glorious Assumption into heaven, she wants us to understand that this unique blessing conferred upon the lowly handmaiden of the Lord was God’s recompense for her exemplary poverty of spirit. Inviting us to look to Mary as the first disciple, encouraging us to contemplate her as sharing fully in Christ’s resurrection, the Church’s intention is to lead us to believe in the power of His resurrection in and for our own lives. The Church invites us to see Christ’s resurrection as a power capable of lifting us up in the same way as Mary has been exalted.

For this reason the Feast of Mary’s Assumption has been referred to in some circles as the Church’s *summer Pascha: our summer Easter*. Just as death was not the last word for Jesus, nor was it the last word for Mary, neither will it be the last word for us. The story of the resurrection is played out over and over again in all our lives, if only we open our eyes to recognise this; if only we consent to this happening in us. As much as Satan may try to thwart God’s plan for this world’s salvation, for the recovery, healing and restoration of our lives (and the evil one will try hard to do this!), nothing will be able to stop God from accomplishing His desire and purpose for us. Admittedly, it doesn’t always feel like victory is ours. There are times when we feel deflated, defeated, crushed and on the brink of complete destruction, but even then, even when we find ourselves *hemmed in on every side* (to quote St Paul) and seemingly about to lose all, God is there by our side. The Lord of victory and life is always there to see us through the dark shadows that menace us and threaten our lives. He is there to defeat the attacks waged upon us.

Ultimately it will be for us as it was for Jesus and as it is for Mary – life in abundance will be ours: and that flow of life in abundance nothing and no one will be able to put a halt to.

Amen!