

## FEAST OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY 2018 EUCHARIST (15.08.2018)

In many countries, especially in southern Europe, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, today is a public holiday, a day for Mass, for outdoor processions and fun, to celebrate the heavenly birthday of the Our Lord's Mother, Blessed Virgin Mary. They are rejoicing in Mary's Assumption into heaven – that ancient pious belief arising first amongst Christians in the eastern churches and from the 8<sup>th</sup> century in the West to be made an article of faith for Roman Catholics by Pope Pius XII in 1950. This festival to mark Our Lady's arrival in heaven acknowledges that unique role Mary played in the story of our salvation in Jesus Christ.

In a similar attempt to highlight the significance of Mary Abp. Cranmer gave her 6 feast days in the Prayer Book Calendar. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the Church of England decided, perhaps surprisingly that of all those feast days, to make 15<sup>th</sup> August the Red Letter festival for the Blessed Virgin Mary. With her elderly cousin Elizabeth today we honour her as 'the most blessed among women'.

'When the fullness of time had come God sent His Son, born of a woman'. God chose to invite a young woman from Nazareth to be the mother of the one who would deliver humanity from the grip of sin and death. At a time when anti-Semitism has raised its ugly head in our society, we should remember that that woman was Jewish, her Son was born a Jew.

In Mary's womb heaven and earth met, God, no longer remote, as it were on the mountain top, but in our very midst. God's action in Mary reminds us that although we may distinguish between the sacred and the secular, God is active in the whole of life. This is important in our understanding, not only for those who make the decisions on how this ancient cathedral is to be used but more

importantly because many with influence in our society – broadcasters, politicians, secularists - seek to push religion to the margins, claiming that faith is a private matter for home and leisure, not something to bring to bear on what we say and do in the work place, in our political judgements or even when society debates what is acceptable in birth, human relationships and dying.

God's choice of Mary shows that true greatness and significance do not rest on fame or wealth. That choice turned accepted human values on their head. As Mary proclaimed in the Magnificat, the canticle, sung or said here every day 'He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek'. The Blessed Virgin Mary was no great orator. She did not work miracles or rule a nation. Her greatness lies in the fact that she was a devoted mother – chosen by God because He knew that she could be what was required, just as He invites each of us to live and die in His loving service. Ultimately the life of Mary matters because her Son Jesus is the Son of God.

Mary had to make a choice. We celebrate because when she believed that God was inviting her, a single woman, to step out into the unknown with all its dangers she accepted to be the mother of the Lord's Christ. Obedience is at the heart of her story and should be part of our discipleship.

Mary's obedience was not that moment of choosing, a, yes/ no moment but a commitment to live out that choice. Her faithfulness in that obedience is seen not only in the challenges of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem, nor in the demands of raising a bright boy through his questioning teenage years. We glimpse Mary urging on her Son to begin his ministry at the wedding of Cana, trusting Him. At the foot of the Cross and no doubt in the weeks before that, faithful through the pain of watching not only her son but the promised Messiah suffer and die. Mary never deserted Jesus.

From the Book of Acts know that she rejoiced in His resurrection.  
Her obedience to God's call, her trust in God's grace in the end  
brought this faithful servant to be with Him in glory.

Mary's life reminds us that when we give our Yes to God the way  
may be costly. Ann Lawson's poem 'Theotokos - God bearer'  
expresses this –

Would I be so willing  
to offer myself to bear God's Son ?  
To bear the shame and disgrace  
of bearing a child of an unknown father outside of marriage ?

Would I have watched my own son die ?

Thank you, Mary, you did.  
You heard and looked, observed and listened.  
Lived with the pain of unknowing,  
Lived with the shadow of the Cross

Not as a stained glass window saint,  
not as some saccharine- coated statue,  
but as a flesh and blood woman  
who knew what it meant  
to bear the burden of unknowing,  
and was prepared to live the pain  
of bearing God'.

Today, with the angel we say 'Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is  
with you, Blessed are you among women'.