

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	16 August 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Blessed Virgin Mary
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

There is a common misconception that the Church of England does not revere Mary the mother of Jesus - but it is a misconception. Our Church recognises her as the Theotokos, a Greek word which means, 'The Bearer of God' or put more humanly, 'Mother of God.' Of course, she is not Mother of God as such because God has no father or mother. But she is mother of the Son of God made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord, therefore Mother of God Incarnate.

Together with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches we celebrate this annual festival in her honour. The Church of England also celebrates her birthday on the 8th of September and those crucial events in the life of Jesus in which she took part: the Annunciation of his birth, his appearance and manifestation at Christmas and Epiphany, his Presentation in the Temple which was also her Purification according to the Law of Moses, and her standing at his cross on Good Friday. She was also present at Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, when she received the gift of the Holy Spirit with the Apostles.

Every English cathedral also has a Lady Chapel, dedicated to her honour and – as in in ours - often containing splendid stained-glass windows depicting her role in the salvation achieved by her son. Almost every day as well her canticle of praise, the Magnificat, is sung at Evensong. We have just heard it in today's gospel. In all these festivals and practices, we are fully at one with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.

As Anglicans however, we differ from them regarding our public prayer. Unlike them we do not, in our publicly approved worship, address Mary or any of the saints directly, though some Anglican parishes and places of pilgrimage do use such prayers. But the officially authorised liturgy of the Church of England is addressed solely to the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One may hear individual hymns and anthems in which Mary and the Saints are addressed but apart from a single refrain in our Church's Daily Prayer, our official liturgy does not normally do that. That does not betoken any disrespect to Mary. But as the Anglican Church attempts to be both Catholic and Reformed, the Church of England tries to keep its focus on the unique person of Jesus, our only Lord and Saviour.

In this August festival our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters celebrate their belief – shared with the Eastern Orthodox - that at the conclusion of her earthly life, Mary's body was raised up by Christ, making her the first among the redeemed. That is known as her Assumption – her taking up - into heaven. It is a very old belief, but our Church does not see sufficient evidence in Scripture or the Church's earliest traditions to justify making it essential to our faith. That remains as a disagreement between us and the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The Church of England does not therefore require us to believe it - though of course what individual Anglicans choose to believe is up to them.

However, we should never speak unjustly about our fellow Christians or caricature their beliefs. They do not worship Mary as a goddess – not at all! They do venerate her as the most redeemed person in the Church – but redeemed like all of us not by her own merits but solely by the grace of her Son. When they call on her in prayer, they do not adore her but ask for her prayers. Indeed, a

recent document from Rome reminded everyone not to exaggerate the role of Mary in God's saving work.

What then are we commemorating today? This August festival is the oldest celebration of Mary in the Church. It began in Jerusalem on the traditional day of her death and is called her 'Dormition.' The word 'Dormition' comes from the Latin word dormire - 'to sleep' - because in the Early Church, death was understood as falling asleep in the Lord. You may also know that dormire gives us the English word 'dormitory' a place where one sleeps – though in the boarding school where I worked getting the children to go to sleep in the dormitory was the most impossible task of the day!

Many great icons of the Eastern Church depict that moment of Mary's death - her falling asleep in the Lord. You can see a detail from one Russian icon reproduced in our newsletter today. The Lord Jesus, her risen Son, comes in glory to carry her soul to heaven as her body expires on earth. Mary's soul is shown as a newborn infant wrapped in swaddling bands. Such a tender and motherly image recalls Jesus' own birth at Christmas, when she wrapped him in swaddling bands and laid him in a manger.

Now as she dies, he comes to bring her to eternal life. Christ is portrayed as spiritual mother, an idea also much loved by Julian of Norwich, one of the greatest English mystics. Mary gave human life to Jesus in the wonder of his incarnation: at her death he gives her everlasting life, bringing her to new birth in the kingdom of heaven – just as he does for all believers.

One of great strength of the catholic tradition - Roman, Orthodox and Anglican – is that it has a place for those images of birth and nurture. That goes at least some way toward stopping our faith from becoming too 'macho' - 'muscular Christianity' - as it is sometimes called. The figure of Mary and her icons help to keep alive those dimensions of birth, tenderness and nurture, holding them firmly at the heart of Christian faith.

Today we have heard the Magnificat, Mary's canticle of praise to God her Saviour. We will hear it again at Evensong as we do every day. To magnify something or someone is to make them greater in size. We all know how a magnifying glass makes it possible for us to see small print and read it more clearly. Mary sang, 'My soul magnifies the Lord!' But how on earth could Mary, or anyone for that matter, make God look bigger?

Of the greatness of God there has never been any doubt. The Hebrew prophets taught the Jewish people that God is all-mighty and all-powerful. In Islam too, the exclamation, 'God is great!' plays an essential part. But our Christian faith tells us something wholly unexpected, something we could never have worked out on our own. Yes, God is great, but he is unimaginably so – so great that he is even able to make himself very small, to reach out to us in love. He did that in the incarnation of Jesus, his eternal Son, when he became human, a child for us. Mary his mother is the living proof of that incredible revelation of God's majesty. It is not the majesty of some cosmic potentate, a great dictator in the sky, but the wholly unexpected greatness of divine humility. Mary, the humble girl from Nazareth, chosen by God to cooperate with his will, is the magnifying glass who revealed that sublime greatness of God to us.

But she claimed no merit for herself. She celebrated God as her Saviour, also singing in the Magnificat, 'My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour!' With Mary, as with everything to do with God's salvation, it is always and everywhere the work of grace. Today, as we celebrate with our fellow Christians of East and West, let us ask God to make us - like Mary - into magnifying glasses for him that others may come to see the greatness of our God, who humbled himself to be born and even to die on a cross. With the whole Church let us echo Mary's prophecy and proclaim her blessed - and let us rejoice with her in our salvation.