

Assumption 2020

Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:1-7

Let me place my tongue in my cheek! As we celebrate today this feast of Mary you might be tempted to join with her in her words at the Annunciation. When Gabriel tells her she is to give birth, the scriptures tell us she was much perplexed and said how can this be since I am a virgin. Perhaps you too in the celebration are much perplexed and be tempted to say: how can this be, since I am an Anglican.

Many churches across the Anglican world including our own Cathedral Church of St Saviour, Goulburn have a Lady Chapel. Usually they feature a picture, or icon of Mary, or perhaps a statue or stained glass window. In the parish in which I grew up there was a window in the Lady Chapel depicting the passage in chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation: *A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.* The woman in the window at St Luke's as in many icons is depicted as Mary, Queen of Heaven and it is this text and this iconography that is part of the thinking behind today's feast. However we don't hear that text this morning and this is probably indicative of a certain Anglican reticence to embrace this text and to name Mary as Queen, there is an Anglican wariness, born out of our reformed nature, in matters concerning to devotion to Mary.

Let me preface what I am about to say by quoting Cardinal Newman who as an Anglican preached a sermon called 'The reverence due to the Blessed Virgin Mary.' He said in that sermon that he '*sees it as a rule of the Church to celebrate the attributes of Mary only in so far as in honouring her the Church the more honours Christ.*'

Going back to my formative years, a hymn that was a favourite in the family was one that began:

Ye who own the faith of Jesus,  
Sing the wonders that were done,  
When the love of God the Father  
O'er our sins the victory won,  
When he made the Virgin Mary  
Mother of his only Son

The opening of this hymn, suggests that our redemption, the very foundation of our faith is not just centred on the cross, but on the entire life of Jesus, from his conception at the Annunciation. In the words of song 'Mary's boy child': And man will live forever more because of Christmas Day. Mary says yes to God, 'let it be done to me according to your will.' In this way love is conceived within her and she becomes the Mother of the Word made flesh. Surely our calling too, we who in that lovely expression 'own the faith of Jesus', to say yes to God and make room for that love to be conceived within us. The second verse helps us understand who Mary is:

Blessèd were the chosen people  
Out of whom the Lord did come,  
Blessèd was the land of promise  
Fashioned for his earthly home;  
But more blessed far the Mother  
She who bare him in her womb

In the Old Testament the prophets often give voice to Israel in poetry. We can see that in today's reading from Isaiah. Look again at the passage from Isaiah that we

heard this morning. Who is the I? Imagine those words on the lips of Mary. In the Book of Revelation she is personification of the chosen people, she is the Israel from whom the Messiah will come. Mary is, the Prototype of the Church, the new Israel, the land of promise. Mary, the Church are sacramental, they point to Christ

The third verse takes us further. Mary is not a passive participant, we honour her in her own right and we can see why she has such a place in our Church.

Wherefore let all faithful people  
Tell the honour of her name,  
Let the Church in her foreshadowed  
Part in her thanksgiving claim;  
What Christ's mother sang in gladness  
Let Christ's people sing the same.

There is nothing sentimental about this love that is conceived in her, and potentially in us. It is prophetic, political, it is the hard yards of making present the Kingdom of God, we read her manifesto together in the words of the Magnificat, 'what she sang in gladness, let Christ's people sing the same.' In this way Mary again foreshadows the Church. Mary, the Church is prophetic, they point to Christ.

But the extraordinary thing is that despite Mary being for many a source of division, she is in fact a source of unity. She refuses to be constrained by the inevitable emphases of women and men, of folk of differing politics and ethnicity. Some may indeed find comfort in her ideal of Motherhood, of obedience but she will not allow us to rest there. She is scandalous, adventurous, in scripture and history she will not be confined, she has always been able of bridging and transcending differences without denying them. And so among all this religious-speak we find a quintessential human being and this is important.

And so the fourth verse takes us into the realm of intercession. We pray for each other, we bring each other to God. In this way we are truly one, Mary is at one with us in our humanity, in all our fears and doubts, our strivings and in this way we can call her Mother of the Church and us adopted children. Mary, the Church is pastoral, they point to Christ.

Let us weave our supplications,  
She with us and we with her,  
For the advancement of the faithful,  
For each faithful worshipper,  
For the doubting, for the sinful,  
For each heedless wanderer.

Today we celebrate the completion of Mary's life and we recall the words from the Magnificat 'all generations will call me blessed.' We do indeed and we do so as an exemplar of grace filled humanity. Whilst we may find some of the dogmas of Mary somewhat dogmatic, clumsy even, we can hold to the mystery that they speak of. She should be for us a symbol of the hope of human unity in all its diversity. A hope that finds its culmination in the Kingdom of God, where with her and all the saints we hope to rest, pray and worship for ever and perhaps even wear a diadem! I pray that Mary will continue to remain as much of a challenge to us as she is a comfort. Yes we can lay aside that Anglican Wariness and join in with the chorus of that hymn: Hail Mary, hail Mary, hail Mary full of grace. Amen.