

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Mary, Mother of Our Lord—15 August 2021

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Galatians 4:4-7, Revelation 12:1-6, Luke 1:26-38, Luke 1:46-55

Celebrating Mary

It is the Blessed Virgin and her role within the sweep of salvation history beginning at the annunciation that announces the separation of our Christian tradition from the Jewish one that preceded it and the Islamic that followed it. It is worth noting that Matthew's gospel written for a community of Jews doesn't place the same emphasis on Mary as does Luke, writing for a Greek readership and I wonder whether it is the Greeks that we should thank for the Virgin? The first Christians were Jews, but the people they converted were Greeks, these folk were largely in modern day Turkey and in parts of Greece. Paul wrote to them and today we read a short passage of his letter to the Galatians. It is often described as the Magna Carta of Christian liberty. Paul writes to the has founded and reminds them not to be enticed to the old ways. They are not bound under law but under love. In the short passage we heard this morning he tells them that God has come into their midst in the very person of his son, the one in whom the spirit rests, the one who relates to God as a child, calling God Abba, Father. He tells them that he has been born of a woman, born under the law, in order that they might be released from the law. Mary, though not church he named, is the means whereby liberty is brought forth into the world. This is given voice in our scriptures, the Messiah is not just a liberator for those oppressed under the old strictures of the Mosaic Law, but in the words of the Magnificat we hear Mary proclaim that freedom is won from economic and political oppression in the kingdom inaugurated by her son.

Today the Churches of both east and west mark the end of Mary's earthly life; in the east as the Dormition or falling asleep of Mary. In the catholic west the Assumption, Mary's ascent to heaven. This catholic festival was not universally accepted when it was finally pronounced in 1950 by Pius XII, it still isn't; but Carl Jung applauded the move, 'at last' he said 'the feminine in God is recognised!' Mary becomes then the icon of feminine, indeed human, possibility. Heaven and earth unite in her as they do in us as we say yes to God, as we gather and worship in Eucharist and as we reach out beyond ourselves to both care for and challenge the world around us.

The difficulty with Mary has since the time of the Reformation been her role in salvation. Some parts of the Church gave her the title co-redemptrix which the reformers rejected and which the Church today in the west rarely uses. But there is something unique about Mary, something about her role in the course of our salvation that continues to inspire and be the source of enchantment. Our season of Advent each year focusses on the story of the annunciation, we can barely imagine our Christmas story without it, and I wonder if it is this sense of liberation and freedom that so engages our imaginations. Her 'yes' to God at the annunciation, when the angel brought news that she would be mother of Jesus, reveals a radical reaction against all that binds; and we are called in the same way, to resist all that binds or prevents us from being fully human: toxic religion, culture, politics.

So we need rehabilitate the image of Mary. Far from being a woman trapped in a man's world, a pawn of patriarchy, she is the sign of liberation for all those who are oppressed. As we celebrate this festival our news is filled with stories from Afghanistan where the Taliban are in the ascendancy and once again the people of that nation face the prospect of discrimination and oppression, particularly woman and girls. This for me and many like me is difficult to comprehend. Few commentators, let alone preachers would dare to approach

overconfidently the great vision in the Book of Revelation of the pregnant woman crowned with the stars, the satanic dragon waiting to destroy her son at his birth. But if we think first historically we can see that the Book of Revelation was written at a time when the earliest Christians suffered intense persecution. The woman represents the persecuted Church of the day facing down oppression, the crown of twelve representing the community of the redeemed. There is truth in this but I for one find no stretch of the imagination to see this as Mary, the Queen of Heaven whose son at his birth poses a threat to all those dehumanising forces of his day, and continues to do so today, through his body the Church.

I stand today once again before an empty church speaking into a camera. It is not my natural habitat, I have never aspired to being news reader. 'Good News' reader perhaps! But I do so in the faith of the Church which boldly claims that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Among them is Mary, the mother of our Lord, whose example and prayer continues to inspire. Today we celebrate her life and commit ourselves to following her example to speak out against all that binds and dehumanises, to magnify God's name. To make room that God may have a larger place in our lives and in the world. And that with her and all the saints we will gather in the fullness of time in God's kingdom where we may worship him forever. Amen.