

The Assumption

15 8 10

Almighty God,
who looked upon the lowliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary
and chose her to be the mother of your only son,
grant that we who are redeemed by his blood
may share with her in the glory of your eternal kingdom.

My text may be found in a line from the Magnificat, the song of Mary:

‘he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant’ (Luke 1 v48)

Here in France, the 15th August is a special day, a public holiday. It is doubly special here in Dinard because we remember the liberation of the town from the German occupation during the Second World War on this day in 1944.

Liberation, to be made free, is what religion is all about. We are freed from the burden of our wrong-doing, we are freed from the weight of our past mistakes and we are free to enjoy the life we have been given knowing that we are loved and that we can mirror that love in what we do. We are at liberty to be children of God because God has set us free by choosing to be born as one of us and to live life of a person in the flesh as we all do, ultimately dying for us on the cross and rising again on the third day, on a Sunday morning like today.

The Incarnation, the Word made flesh, is the beginning of that process. And that process of conception: a fertilised egg in the womb, a zygote, an embryo, a foetus

and the birth of a baby took place after the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Virgin Mary, after she conceived, and after nine months pregnancy she bore a son, Jesus.

Mary enjoys a unique place in the Christian story: a young woman, not much more than a girl who said yes to God, who was willing to make her will conform to God's will and to do what she was called to do: to be the Mother of God, the Godbearer - 'Theotokos'.

But today, August 15th, it is not so much her life as her death on which I want to focus. Mary was a human being like us. Like us she died. That is certain. In the Orthodox Church, today is called the Dormition - the falling asleep. Sleep is an image of death and at the end of our life, it is an encouraging thought that we will be at rest. But one area where Christians differ over the Virgin Mary is whether when she died, she went straight to heaven or whether like the rest of humanity, she has to wait for the general resurrection from the dead.

You may recall that I said I had attended a lecture by Nicholas Souchu, the auxiliary Bishop of Rennes, who had spoken to the Groupement Oecuménique last February about the Catholic understanding of Mary and that what he said had helped me understand where they were coming from. Essentially, the Assumption of the Mary straight into heaven is just that - an assumption. It is an assumed truth. It is based not on the evidence of scripture but as a result of theological reflection. If scripture is the sole criteria for determining God's truth, then there is insufficient evidence of the assumption. But Catholics believe it to be true on two grounds.

The first is that there is no grave. Not surprising in the circumstances but there are lots of graves from the time not least those of Peter, Paul and Mark and it is reasonable to assume that if there had been a grave, then it would have been found not least by the indefatigable St Helena of Colchester, the mother of Constantine, the first Christian Emperor of Rome.

The second is the appearance of the Virgin over time and in many places. If the virgin is able to manifest herself to a child like St Bernadette at Lourdes or to a young nun like St Catherine Labouré in Paris then she must have already been taken up to heaven. Coincidentally, France and Italy are the two countries where there have been the most recorded appearances by Mary.

One of the consequences of the Reformation is that we as Christians now differ sharply about how we understand Mary. What we surely share is a respect for the woman who said yes to God. What additional insight the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin may give us is that Mary is active today in the world furthering the work set in motion by her Son Jesus Christ and that she continues to be a force for the good.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
St Bartholomew's Dinard
15th August, 2010*

H: Sermon 22: Assumption

