

Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary 2021

We are indebted to St Luke for the beautiful canticle which is today's Gospel reading. Indeed, we owe him thanks for not only today's Canticle, but also for the Nunc Dimitus - 'Lord, now let your servant go in peace' - so that is both of the Canticles said daily at Evensong, and also for the Benedictus said or sung daily at Morning Prayer, the song of Zechariah which he sang after the birth of his son, John, whom we call The Baptist.

And it is Luke who gives us the Gospel portrait of Mary, the young woman who put herself at the service of God's plan, who agreed to let God's Spirit take hold of her so that the Son of God could take flesh in our midst.

In the Eastern Church she is called 'The God-Bearer', and her feast day is a major festival of the church. Northern European Christians, especially those of the Reformed Tradition, and many Anglicans (well, we are 'reformed' too - catholic and reformed) struggle with this, and with the whole 'Mary thing', if I can put it that way, but if the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, He had to have a mother to give him the flesh!

Today's celebration goes by many names, the BVM, the dormition, the assumption - I just call it the Feast of the BVM, the woman

who was in a sense the very first disciple of Christ. Like all the other, later, disciples she is surprised and frightened by what is asked of her, but she doesn't let her fear determine her response. God has chosen her and she chooses God - and those two choices find fulfilment in each other, and so St Luke presents Mary as the first disciple, the one who hears the word of God and keeps it, the one who follows, no matter the cost, the one who lets the word happen in her life. Jesus once said to a crowd that the one who did the will of his Father was his mother, his brother, his sister. And who did the will of his Father more willingly than Mary?

There is nothing in scripture about the death of Mary and nothing in church teaching which insists that she did not die - what is taught is that she now enjoys eternal life with her Son - a goal that we all hope to attain eventually.

Luke is neither an apostle nor an eye-witness to the events which he relates in his Gospel, but he is inspired to tell the story which he has heard from those he believes to be trustworthy and authoritative - and he orders the story in his own way. His order is more logical than chronological, and he tells the story from the point of view of one who is utterly committed to the universal

significance of the story, and who seeks to share it 'that you may know the truth'. His purpose is pastoral. He wants Theophilus, the person to whom he is writing, and all the beloved of God who will read the story, to come to know the truth and believe in the central figure of his story, the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the son of the frightened young girl who is faced by an angel and by a request - will you be the God Bearer? And Luke gives us her answer - yes. How is that for trust? And in doing this, he (Luke) asks the same question of us all - will you be the God Bearer? Will you carry Jesus in your heart and share him with those you meet? Have you got the faith, do you have Mary's courage, to say 'yes' to God?

Mary's response to the call of God is to sing this great hymn of praise, drawing on the words of Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1Sam2.1-10) when she becomes pregnant after years of waiting, and also on the long history of Israel's relationship with their saviour God. The Magnificat is a prayer made from the position of the down-trodden and the poor, who praise God for his might, his mercy and his continuing concern. It is the radical canticle of the oppressed, longing for reversal and revolution, as they wait in faith and hope that God's promises will be fulfilled - that

littleness will be blessed, that the proud will be toppled from their pedestals, the mighty find themselves unemployed; the little people are no longer unimportant, the hungry are finally fed, the rich awarded nothing. In God's kingdom, she declares, the forgotten and lowly are held precious in God's sight. It is a cry against oppression - the strong are 'scattered', 'put down', 'sent empty away'. No-one is given sympathy if they live because of the neglect of others. The God of Israel is the God who saves and who is actively involved in liberating his people from the powers which oppress them. The prayer speaks of a God who has unambiguous positions on religious, social and economic matters. In that sense, the Magnificat is a revolutionary hymn of praise. Mary voices a radical protest against what we all take for granted; that the mighty will always prevail over the weak, that well-fed nations will thrive whilst elsewhere people die of hunger and disease, that the politically strong will always occupy the thrones of power, that we will get booster Covid jags before health workers in other countries get any vaccine, that children of working parents will go hungry and/or cold and that racial inequality will continue.

Mary proclaims the Good News which Jesus came to bring us even before her Son had been born. Here we have a radical woman, a true disciple, a woman who hungers for a new justice on earth, one that reflects the justice of God.

This is the woman we celebrate today. These are her profound hopes. And so, in turn, they should be our hopes too, as we say, together with Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist - Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

Pray for us, holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Amen