

“MOTHER OUT OF SIGHT”

A REFLECTION ON THE ASSUMPTION OF OUR LADY

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To be asked to write a reflection about the Assumption of Mary is for me a joy. For six years of my ministry I was the spiritual leader of the internationally well-known Anglican Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk, UK. Each year it was such a natural and unselfconscious thing for Anglican, Roman Catholic, and, yes, a smattering of local Methodist pilgrims to mingle together on the eve of the 15th of August for procession and song and sermon, and even to send up fireworks (with Handel accompanying!) in honour of the extraordinary journey to heaven of the Blessed Mother of Jesus.

For some of us so gathered the doctrine of the Assumption as promulgated during the pontificate of Pius XII was required believing. For many Anglicans so gathered, it seemed "fitting" that the body and soul of the one who gave substance to, and grew the divine Son within her, should not see corruption. The notion of "fittingness" is consistent with the abiding, if not doctrinally articulated, traditions of the Church from the earliest days. Though not directly found in Scripture, it surely echoes the promises and hopes found in the New Testament for the faithful, whose lives are "hid with Christ in God." But some, I suspect, who happily joined the singing of the "Aves" in honour of the one whose obedience to God's will reversed the disobedience of Eva (note the Latin play on words!) and of course of the first Adam, simply echoed something Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey is reputed to have said, though sadly I can't find the direct quote: 'Assumption...the doctrine of the Assumption? Some may regard it as a great assumption, but if Mary is not in heaven, what hope have the rest of us?!' Well, one can imagine him saying it!

And of course the great thing which fills the Feast of the Assumption with joy, echoing our hope for our future selves, for those we love who have gone before, and of course declared as true for all those whom the Church calls saints, is the mystery of Mary alive in Christ, now! Mary, sharing in the risen life of her Son as fulsomely as fulsome can be. Transformed, yet still Mary. Most definitely not the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith," for that vocation belongs to Jesus alone, but surely the pioneer of the pattern for faithful Christian living. Her life given to Jesus, heart and soul; her life open to saying Amen to God's will, her life "pondering" mysteries passing our understanding, her life lived and in the hope of the resurrection of the body.

As I allow my imagination to picture the mystery of this feast, I see a holy face looking heavenward but full of unassuming surprise.

In his reflections on the Glorious Assumption, Anglican theologian John Macquarrie, whose book *Mary for All Christians* does much to dispel Anglican anxieties about the Holy Mother, highlights the contrasting root words in both Greek and Latin for the words Ascension (in Greek *anabasis*) and Assumption (in Greek *analepsis*). Ascension means "going up" and gives an active role to the person who goes up. The only one who goes up to the Father by right is the divine Son. "No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of

Man" (John 3:13). By contrast, assumption means "taking up." It is gift, and a gift for Mary entirely dependent on the Ascension of Jesus. The Feast of the Assumption can happily be called the Feast of the "Taking Up" of the Blessed Virgin.

The western Church tends to over-define, asking of words more than they can in speaking of the revealed mystery of the Word made flesh, even if the best intention is to encourage people into right believing about God.

The doctrine of the Assumption, as promulgated by Pius XII, has received this criticism. But here's a thought. It was 1950. The world was cast in the shadows not only of the traumas of war, but of the reality of the countless young Jewish 'Miriams' (Marys) whose bodies and souls had been ravaged - treated with such breathtaking and inhuman disdain because of the perverse doctrines of National Socialism. It would be foolish to think that the world is yet done with such behaviours. The journey of so many young Jewish women to the gas chambers just a few years before, as if they were nothing worth, is in such terrifying contrast to the soaring destiny and dignity for the first century Miriam (Mary) articulated by Pius XII.

Coming when it did, the doctrine stood in the tradition of those Old Testament prophets who called Israel back to a vision of what it means to be faithful, and of those prophets who spoke of a glorious future for the people of God. She who is "among" us as fellow pilgrim is held in such honour by our heavenly Father. By her particular vocation, she is a pre-eminent and altogether singular member of the Church, yet one of us. In his high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus expresses a beautiful personal desire to his Father for those who have been with him, that they "...may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world."

Six years before his sermon in the University Church at Oxford in 1833, credited by Newman as the beginning of the Oxford Movement, the saintly John Keble produced his book of poems entitled *The Christian Year*. By the end of its copyright period, over 375,000 copies had been sold in Britain. Later, just after Newman's conversion, he published *Lyra Innocentium*, a collection of his verse. His friends urged him to omit one that they feared would cause shock and consternation. It was entitled "Mother out of Sight" in which he speaks of his longing to speak the forbidden "Aves"... Mary was indeed in those days out of sight in ordinary English piety and devotion.

And she is indeed out of sight, sadly still so, in so many Anglican communities in honour and devotion. But in reality, where might be this one who is out of sight? Let Thomas Ken, the seventeenth century non-juring bishop give answer in words from one of his great hymns:

"Heaven with transcendent joys her entrance graced; next to His throne her Son his Mother placed; and her below now she's of heaven possessed; all generations are to call her blessed."

What a glorious out-of-sightness for one who though surely "taken up" is, yet so near us in the mystical Body of her Son, the wonderful company which is the Church of God, which transcends time and space, and is One in heaven and on earth.