

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Gospel: Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

REFLECTION 1:

"TAKEN UP BODY AND SOUL...."

From his cross, Jesus entrusted his mother to the care of St. John. Legend has it that John left Jerusalem with Mary and took her to the city of Ephesus on the shores of the Aegean Sea. There he provided her with a dwelling and some believe that it was from this location that Mary, aged legend relates about the mid-sixties, was assumed into heaven.

On November 1st 1950, Pope Pius XII declared solemnly that 'The Immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever virgin, when the course of her earthly life had concluded, was taken up body and soul into heaven'. Mary's original home, destroyed by earthquakes, was rebuilt on its foundation and is now a shrine. I was privileged to celebrate Mass there in 1974. The Church sees Mary's image in the Book of Revelations as 'The woman robed with the sun, the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of 12 stars' (Rev. 12:1).

Today we pause and celebrate a woman who stands out as a model of service and discipleship for all of us. Remember how Elizabeth greeted Mary at Ain Karim 'How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?' At a time when we hear the disciples ask the wrong questions – Who is the greatest? How often must I forgive? – Elizabeth's question is spot on. How is it I am so blessed? That is the question that will lead us to a better life. This is the question the saints have asked, that Mary asked. This is the question that, if we ask it, will give us the strength to endure the hardships of life, and perhaps more important, will ensure that blessings will not go unnoticed. What a sad life to be blessed and not know it!

In Luke and the Acts of the Apostles we encounter a woman who is at once our mother and our guide. Mary is a mother, not only in the sense that she agreed to give birth to Jesus, but she also allowed herself to be inspired and directed by the living word of God in all she said and did. Mary agreed to 'mother the word', to ponder it and to bring it to birth in words and deeds, 'blessed is the womb that bore you ... blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it (Luke 11). It is Mary's privilege to sing the Magnificat, a song composed of an amalgam of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, all of which are shown as coming to fulfillment in Jesus. Mary's song also anticipates what Jesus will preach regarding wealth and power. Some may covet both but it has no lasting value in God's eyes. Rather it is those who are poor and lowly who are God's cherished ones.

Through Simeon in the Temple, Luke announced that Mary would be the humble participant in the saving but sorrowful act of salvation, 'your own soul a sword shall pierce' (Luke 2: 35). Mary was inconspicuous but nevertheless present at every moment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and she remained present to the disciples in the post-Easter era. In her capacity as mother and guide, Mary continues to be a living resource for all of us.

REFLECTION 2: 'A MYSTERY OF LIGHT'

St. John Damascene, an early Church Father, speaks with powerful eloquence when he relates the bodily Assumption of the loving Mother of God to her other gifts and privileges, so closely connected with the glory of her risen Son. It was necessary that she who was preserved from all shadow of sin should have her body kept free from all corruption after death. It was necessary that the Mother of God should share the possessions of her Son and be venerated by every creature as the Mother and Handmaid of God.

The Gospel of the Mass for today puts before us an exchange of blessings and praise between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. In answer to the praise she received, Mary responds with thanksgiving to God. The Canticle, known as the Magnificat, reveals the depths of her soul and her faith, her perfect submission to the word of God and the mission entrusted to her. This song, full of biblical memories speaks of the humble servant of God as the ideal image of the Poor, the anawim, beloved of God, already spoken about in the psalms. The Magnificat speaks of a very refined vision of God and of human beings and their relationship to God as spoken of in the Gospels, but expressed here in lyrical language. The Church domiciles this Canticle in her evening prayer realising the marvels the Lord has done for his faithful throughout the ages.

Mary sees herself clearly as the centre of the Ministry of Salvation – 'From now all ages will call me blessed' (Luke 1: 39-56). Mary marvels at the works of God – 'holy is his name', acting out of love which 'is from age to age, to those who fear him'. He is mindful of his love and of the promises made to our fathers. He has raised the lowly to high places and to the hungry he has given every good thing, while the rich he has sent away empty. He upholds the weak and those who fall.

The Church celebrates the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the handmaid of the Lord who has given birth to the ruler of nations and is clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars. In Mary, we anticipate all that will happen when the end comes, when Christ, raised from the dead, hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power. Along with Mary, the community of the faithful gives thanks for the marvels accomplished by the love of God which 'is from age to age'.

Mary was raised in the glory of her Son, the first fruits from among the dead, because she believed the word and accepted it with total availability. God made her blessed beyond anything she could have

imagined. Mary continues to sing eternally the Canticle of thanksgiving that she sang the day she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Her praise of God is so perfect that the Church never tires of using these words, word that give hope and joy to all believers that they will one day share in her glory.