

Assumption of the BVM

Today we celebrate the Festival of the Assumption of the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, the Mother of our Lord. Now, the precise nature of her raising to glory has been the subject of much theological debate. But this evening, you'll be glad that I'm not going to indulge in metaphysical speculation. I shan't attempt to teach you a physics or chemistry lesson. No. To do so would be to miss the point. It would lead us down the road of obsessing about process, rather than venerating the person. Today is about the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And that's where our focus will be.

From this day all generations will call me blessed.

This is a very familiar line from the Magnificat, the Song of Mary. But what does it mean? The second and third parts of the epithet the *Blessed Virgin Mary* are clear and unambiguous. The first requires a little more reflection and interpretation. But, as we begin, let's take a wider perspective.

The context of our Gospel reading is Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. And you'll recall that Mary's song of praise begins, not with the Archangel Gabriel's tidings of divine favour. No. At that point, she is merely obedient and faithful to God's will. However, when a woman of flesh and blood, like herself, calls her "the mother of my Lord", the message of the angel assumes a living shape. And Mary can't help but glorify her Lord! She sings of the all-excelling perfections of God; his power, his holiness, his mercy and his faithfulness.

The Magnificat is, understandably, very Hebrew in its thought and style. It almost wholly comprises of Old Testament quotations, and there are very clear resonances with Hannah's Prayer on the birth of

Samuel in 1 Samuel chapter 2. It's intriguing that Mary doesn't utter a single, direct word connecting her with her promised Son, but clearly, the whole hymn is inspired by this truth.

The Jews understood that the Messiah would inaugurate a cosmic Jubilee foretold in Isaiah chapter 61. It would be a time of massive political reordering and social reversal. The hungry would be filled with good things, and the rich would be sent away empty. The proud would receive their comeuppance and the humble would have their day in the sun!

But why does Luke use the past tense for all of these revolutionary acts? Well, it's a sort of 'prophetic' perfect tense. Just as we may see the light of dawn emerging before we set our eyes on the morning sun, so many of the future events of the Messianic age had begun to be realised in the very pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary.

Elizabeth refers to Mary as 'blessed' three times in just four verses. St Luke uses two Greek words here – *eulogemene* and *makarios* – but the meaning is essentially the same. The latter word, *makarios* is the one which Mary uses in the Magnificat - *From now on all generations will call me blessed*. Incidentally, it's the same word used in the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount.

Makarios means happy. But not a superficial, fluffy pleasure. It's the religious joy of a person who has a share in divinely-given salvation. And this is the key to understanding Mary's blessedness. She has a vital and indispensable role to play in God's plan for the history of the world.

She does this in two ways. First in a particular, historical sense – in relation to her own racial and religious context. And second, in a general way – in a more universal, all-encompassing sense.

First, the particular. The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures spoke of Israel as God's bride. God's chosen people were to be his beloved partner in the renewal and restoration of his world. In addition, Israel was also to be the symbolic mother out of which the Messiah would be born. We heard about the strange image of the pregnant woman in our first reading from Revelation chapter 12. She is clothed with the sun. The moon is under her feet, and she is crowned with twelve stars. She gives birth to a male child whose destiny is to rule the nations. Now the imagery of the Apocalypse is notoriously challenging to interpret, but many commentators have understood this woman to signify Israel in labour, giving birth to the Messiah (the number 12, as in the 12 tribes, is a clue here).

Over time, the Church added a further interpretive layer. Might this woman be understood as Mary, the personification of her nation? She is Israel focused into a single individual, willingly and obediently accepting her vocation to be the mother of the Messiah. But now, in the Christian era, the Saviour is not only the liberator of Israel, he is the Redeemer of the whole world. Which neatly brings me to my second point, as our lens adjusts to a wider angle.

You see, Mary has a role to play in God's universal plan. God's new beginning in Christ has echoes of the original beginning in Genesis. But this time there is an intriguing reversal. In the Garden of Eden, the woman, Eve, was taken from the body of the man, Adam. But now, in God's new order, the man Jesus comes from the body of a woman, Mary. In Eden, Eve was first to disobey the Lord's command, and she prompted Adam to do the same. But in God's new order, it's Mary who is first to say 'Yes' to God (Luke 1.38), and, of course, she raises her own Son to do the same.

Fr Josef Jungmann was an Austrian Jesuit, and Professor of Pastoral Theology at the University of Innsbruck. He was one of the great liturgical theologians at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Jungmann always liked to remind people that every feast of Mary

was also a feast of Jesus; because every privilege which our faith believes has been extended to our Lady, was given to her by God precisely because of her relationship with her Son. Mary is blessed because she is the mother of Jesus.

And we may share this blessing in and through the humanity that we share with Mary. We are flesh and blood as she was flesh and blood. We don't have the privilege of having such close family ties but we have the family likeness through our adoption as spiritual sons and daughters. You see, Christ extends his mother's privilege to include us all. You'll remember that, as Jesus was teaching, a woman in the crowd cried out to him, "*Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.*" But Jesus' reply was universal and inclusive of all Christians – "*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*" (Luke 11.27f) Mary would have approved. It was her obedience – and ours – that opened the way to eternal life with God.

Mother Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century anchoress and mystic, wrote her *Revelations of Divine Love* based upon the visions she experienced. She explored the mystical relationship and theological interplay of the Motherhood of Mary and the Sonship of Christ. Julian's writings are not always easy to understand. She plays with imagery and metaphor. Her concepts overlap and merge at one moment and then stand distinct the next. What else should we expect from a mystic? We have to allow for the poetry, the nuance and the mystery, and somehow allow God to speak to us through spirit and intuition and not just rationality. So I'll leave the last word to her, because I think she just might be onto something when it comes to our appreciation of why the Virgin Mary was indeed 'blessed':

So our Lady is our mother, in whom we are enclosed and born of her in Christ, for she who is mother of our saviour is mother of all who are saved in our saviour; and our saviour is our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.

