

## Homily for The Feast of The Assumption 2009

The Feast of the Assumption is our annual celebration of the climax of Mary's life. Her years of nurturing Jesus, those trying times of following him, seeing him misunderstood, rejected, mocked and murdered, and the years of fellowship with the apostles of the early church, now reach their end, and she is taken body and soul into Heaven. Other feasts of Our Lady ask us to consider her earthly life: the visitation, say, but this feast asks us to look to Heaven. The Opening Prayer talks of her being taken body and soul into Heaven, before asking that we may 'see Heaven as our final goal', and the preface mentions her being taken into Heaven as the beginning and the pattern of what we ourselves can hope for. So, as we celebrate this feast we make Mary's words our own. She says 'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord', and we are doing just the same. We look at what God has done for Mary, we see that he has kept her safe, that death has not destroyed her; we see that not only her soul, but her body, too, that body that carried Jesus, that loved him, held him, touched him, cared for him, has been kept safe for all eternity; we look at all of this, and we say 'God is great', that is to say we 'magnify the Lord'.

Mary's song 'Magnificat' is something of great importance to us as Christians. One of the dangers of everyday life is that the mundane, the ordinary, the everyday can begin to crowd out the things that really matter. It is quite easy for us to forget about the things of God from one Sunday to the next. We are aware that these things are important, but somehow they are less strident, less demanding than more ordinary matters, so our minds are endlessly occupied with problems at work, with balancing the needs of home and family life, with keeping the car on the road, food on the table, money in the bank. Mary's Magnificat is an antidote to that. In this song she looks at her life, she looks at what God has done, at what he means to her, and she cries out with joy 'God is great!' This song invites us to look at our lives from one day to the next in the light of God's activity, to look at our lives each day and to cry out God is great. In the Prayer of the Church, the divine office that is celebrated day after day throughout the world, the central point of the evening liturgy is the singing of the Magnificat: wherever that liturgy is celebrated people take some time out of their everyday lives to stand before God and sing 'God is great!'

Today, among all the other things that make us stand awestruck before God, is his choice to rescue us through Jesus, a rescue that brings Mary safe to Heaven. We are asked by the liturgy to turn our own eyes to Heaven, and to live our lives with Heaven as our final goal. This sounds quite admirable in theory, but in practice we often find it rather hard. In the Palestine of Jesus' time life expectancy at birth was between 20 and 30; in Britain today it is about 80. Somehow the prospect of Heaven seems more remote to us, we feel we can take a chance and put it off a bit longer. Of course we hope to get to Heaven, but for most of us we are optimistic that it won't be for a while yet. I am happy to see Heaven as my final goal, but I don't want to give it too much thought here and now.

The liturgy of this feast, however, asks us to do something more than this. It asks us to have a change of heart. We tend to think of daily life and Heaven as two separate realities. We live our lives as best we can, we try to do the right thing, and we hope that we will get to Heaven almost in spite of daily life. We feel very much at home in our everyday world and Heaven seems rather remote, distant and different. This feast,

however, challenges us to turn this rather on its head. We tend to see ordinary life as normal human existence, what humanity is really like, with Heaven as a rather distant and remote place which we hope one day to discover. We look at it as if we are presently at home, hoping one day to discover a new world in Heaven. This feast asks us to reverse this. We need to learn to live as if our real home, the place we really belong, the place which is normal human life, is Heaven. We are not citizens of earth hoping one day to be transported to Heaven; we are citizens of Heaven living now on earth, but hoping one day to find our way home. Normal human life is not life as it is lived on earth, it is life as it is lived in Heaven. The challenge for each one of us is to live life as citizens of Heaven, which is our true homeland. We are summoned and challenged to struggle for that perfection which we will possess in Heaven. Good people, people who live virtuous lives, people we admire for their generosity, or their love, or their patience, are not strange superhuman beings, they are real, authentic human beings, people living life as it is meant to be lived, that bit closer to life as we will all lead it in Heaven. Virtuous living is something we admire, something we find beautiful, because it strikes a chord deep within our hearts. Deep inside, probably at an unconscious level, we realise that such good living is a sign of wholeness, of completeness, and we long for just those things.

Virtue is not a very fashionable word. It is one of the features of modern life that, in deciding what to do, people begin from the question ‘what do I want to do’ rather than from the question ‘what should I do’. This has left us much less human and indeed also less free, because we are enslaved by our passions and desires. We know that this is inhuman, degrading, but somehow we find it difficult to resist. There is a sort of sinking to the lowest common denominator; we see other people around us living according to what they want, what will give them pleasure, and we find it hard not to do the same. Why should we resist, why should we be different? This feast tries to give us the answer. In all that we do, we should be trying to live as citizens of Heaven; Mary has not gone there as a one-off, an unusual occurrence; she has gone there to be the first, she has gone there at the front of a long line of men and women that stretches down to the present day. This feast reminds us that a good life, a life lived well, a life lived as a citizen of Heaven, is a beautiful life: “Tota pulchra es, Maria” you are all beautiful, Mary. Heaven is our home, and it is the place where Mary now is. God has taken Mary home; God is great – Magnificat! God has made us all as people fit for Heaven, our home; God is great, Magnificat! By living as citizens of Heaven we can, with all the imperfections of sin and frailty, of course, live lives that are virtuous, lives that are therefore marked with beauty; God is great, Magnificat!