

Homily given for the Assumptiontide Festival
Society of Mary, North West Ward
S. James, Latchford, Diocese of Chester
20th August 2016
by Fr Daniel Howard
(Assistant Curate, S. Columba, Anfield)

Lectionary: *Rev 11:19; 12:1-6, 10, Ps 45: 9-11, 13-15, 1 Cor 15:20-27, Lk 1:39-56*

✠ In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

A fortnight ago I attended *the* event of the year, along with lots of other people. It was a week of wild weather: with rain of biblical proportions, to blissful sunshine, all within the space of an hour! It was a week of early starts and very late nights. It was a week of tents and talkative teenagers. It was a week of soul stirring live music, deep reflection and heartfelt tears. No, it wasn't the ever-popular Glastonbury Music Festival – but a festival in an equally holy place – it was the Walsingham Youth Pilgrimage – the highlight of the year for any young catholic and their priests.

One pilgrim stole the show, on several occasions, seven-year old Joseph. As the Liverpool pilgrims waited for the holy mile procession to begin from Slipper Chapel, Joseph asked me if I'd be going barefoot? He was. I said I hadn't decided – the road was wet and full of stones, and I was tired. The devout child replied: "well, if you don't, you obviously don't care about God, or about Mary, so what do you care about?"

After an explosion of laughter from Bishop Glyn, I duly removed my shoes and we proceeded on a gruelling holy mile following the image of our Lady, carried ahead of us like the Ark of the Covenant, guiding our way.

So do we care about Mary?

Our celebration today puts that question to us. The answer is of course, yes, we do care about Mary. We will know, as members of the Society of Mary, that the first object of the rule is to love and honour Mary, and we have fulfilled our obligation today, as we gather to celebrate one of her 'principal feasts'.¹

At the heart of the liturgy that night in Walsingham, at the Slipper Chapel, on the holy mile and in the Shrine grounds, before the altar of light, was presence, power and peace.

Our Lady herself embodies all of those things: presence, power and peace.

But as in every aspect of her life, such things remain hidden, hidden behind her humility as the handmaid of the Lord.

In our first reading from the book of Revelation we hear that 'God's temple in heaven was opened, and the Ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple'.²

These words speak first and foremost about presence: the presence of Mary that accompanied our procession, and will today, is one and the same with the presence of the Ark in the heavenly Jerusalem. So what might these words mean, particularly in light of our celebration?

It means nothing other than this: that Mary is the Ark of the New Covenant.

She is that presence in the heavenly Jerusalem.

¹ <http://societyofmary.weebly.com/about.html>

² *Revelation 11.19*

But how do we reach such a conclusion?

The scriptures point us to the reality. The first reading set for the Vigil Mass of the Assumption is taken from the first book of Chronicles chapter fifteen. Here, the Ark of the Covenant is carried through the hill country of Judea, to its home in the Temple in the earthly city of Jerusalem.

We cannot underestimate the importance of the Ark for the people of Israel. The Ark contained the presence of God: in the form of the tablets of stone, the Ten Commandments, the very word of God. In the form of the manna rained down from heaven, to feed the people in the wilderness. And finally in the form of the staff of Aaron, a priest of the Lord.³ The Ark is so revered that King David dances and leaps in worship before it.⁴

Saint Luke paints a similar picture today. A picture of presence focused not on an Ark made of stone, but on an Ark of flesh. In our Gospel, we also hear of one who goes to the hill country. We hear of the infant John the Baptist who, like King David, leaps before the Ark whilst in his mother Elizabeth's womb.

Mary then, is the Ark of the New Covenant, containing in her own womb not the Word of God in stone, but in flesh. Not in manna, but in the living bread. Not in the symbol of a rod, but in the eternal high priest who comes to sacrifice himself on the altar of the Cross.

³ Exodus 40.20, Exodus 16.22, Numbers 17.20, see also, Hebrews 9.4.

⁴ 2 Samuel 6.13-15.

That Ark is not reposed in the earthly Jerusalem, but in the heavenly Jerusalem. And so when Saint John speaks of the Ark in heaven, he speaks not of a stone box, but of a woman, clothed with the sun. In the words of Pope Francis at World Youth Day at the Shrine of Czestochowa, 'she is the stairway God took to descend and draw near to us'.⁵ 'Mary is the tabernacle filled with the glory of the Lord'.⁶

Presence: she is the heavenly Queen in gold of Ophir.

What of power?

Did those young pilgrims experience power that night? Yes, as they travelled with the presence of Our Lady we experienced the power of God – because she pointed us to her divine Son. Our procession led us to the shrine grounds, to the image of her Son, the Word made flesh, in that very same bread of life in the Blessed Sacrament. Mary's presence before us pointed us to Jesus and to his power to save. She is the one, by virtue of her Assumption, who reveals to us what is to come thanks to her Son's victory over sin and death.

She is the one who reminds us that 'his mercy endures forever'.⁷ It is thanks to his mercy that we too can sing with her 'my soul glorifies the Lord'.⁸ Mary's Assumption to heaven gives us confidence that if we are in Christ...all shall be brought to life, as we heard in our second reading.⁹

⁵ <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/07/28/full-text-pope-franciss-homily-during-mass-at-czestechowa/>

⁶ Quotation from Fr Damian Feeney's *Assumptiontide Lecture, Walsingham, 2016*: <https://damianfeeney.wordpress.com/2016/08/13/the-walsingham-assumptiontide-lecture-2016/>

⁷ Psalm 136.1

⁸ Luke 1.46

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15.22 (paraphrase)

Mary is assumed body and soul to heaven. We long to share that same life, the resurrection life, that bodily dwelling in the heavenly Jerusalem. In the words of the ubiquitous advert from Virgin trains, we too, like the Virgin Mary are 'bound for glory', the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem.

As we knelt before the Blessed Sacrament reposed on the altar of light, with the image of Our Lady pointing clearly to it, we were overwhelmed with a sense of peace.

We know that peace which passes all understanding is more than a simple sense of inner calm and serenity; it is the knowledge that through grace we are justified by God. Mary knew that grace, that peace and that mercy.

Mary knew herself to be reconciled to God, and her Assumption points again to that reality of peace. We can have confidence that if we trust in God, we too can experience the very same peace of Christ. Like Mary, we too can experience the fullness of redemption; we too can be full of grace when the image of her Son is perfected in us.

Mary's Assumption speaks of presence, power and peace.

Each of us is called to be like Mary, icons of the presence of God in this world, so that others the world may know that presence, his power to save, and his peace, which gives life and life to the full.

I mentioned earlier one of the objects of SOM, the Society's rule points us to go further, to 'engage in apostolic and pastoral work'.¹⁰ We know how urgently the world needs this apostolic work. If Christianity is to flourish

¹⁰ <http://societyofmary.weebly.com/about.html>

again in the West, we, as members of this Society, must commit ourselves to this endeavor. We must not fall into the trap of only attending Mass, as good as that may be, but be nourished by the Lord to go out, and *proclaim* the Good News as Mary proclaimed it. Mary then, is to be our model of evangelism. In the Assumptide lecture at Walsingham last weekend, Fr Damian Feeney said that we should see Mary as the *proto-evangelist*, the first evangelist.¹¹ And quoting Pope Francis, he said that the Church has a ‘Marian style of evangelization’.¹² Mary is the ‘Mother of evangelization’, and if she is our mother, which I’m sure all of us here believe, that means that we *must* be agents of the *new* evangelization.¹³ We must think of creative and engaging ways to point people to Jesus in the eucharist, because if we do not, we will be fighting for survival.¹⁴

So:

the moment has come to commit...[all our] energies to the new evangelization...No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.¹⁵

We cannot keep to ourselves the words of eternal life given to us in our encounter with Jesus Christ: they are meant for everyone, for every man and for every woman...It is our responsibility to pass on what, by God’s grace, we ourselves have received.¹⁶

¹¹ <https://damianfeeney.wordpress.com/2016/08/13/the-walsingham-assumptiontide-lecture-2016/>

¹² Ibid, referencing Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The joy of the Gospel* 288 (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

¹³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 284.

¹⁴ ‘Pointing people to Jesus in the Eucharist’ – words of Bishop Philip North on Sacramental Evangelism (see previous *New Directions* issues for the full text)

¹⁵ St John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio: On the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate*, 3. (http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html)

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 91. (http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html)

With Mary as our model of evangelization – we are challenged to go out and *proclaim* the Good News, to tell people about Jesus, because

there is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed.¹⁷

In this holy Jubilee Year of Mercy, we are called to be merciful like the Father; the greatest mercy that we can share in the world is the *truth* of God revealed in Jesus Christ, the very face of the Father's mercy.¹⁸

We need to ask ourselves, as I was asked by young Joseph, “do we care about God? Do we care about Mary?”

If the answer is ‘yes’, we will strive to be like Mary, who herself said ‘yes’ to God, *proclaiming* his greatness and following in his ways – and we too will then come body and soul to the heavenly Jerusalem – and through our evangelization, others, by God's good grace and mercy will too.

If we say “yes” we are ‘bound for glory’; and in that glory we will see and experience that full presence, power and peace of God who is all in all, and whose mercy endures forever. And with Mary we will say: ‘now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come’.¹⁹

Let us now pray the prayer of Pope Francis, which speaks of the Marian style of evangelization:

¹⁷ Bl. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22. (http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html)

¹⁸ The key element of Benedict XVI's Papacy (<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/on-his-88th-birthday-benedict-xvi-lauded-for-emphasis-on-mercy-80581/>)

¹⁹ Revelation 12.10

Mary, Virgin and Mother,
you who, moved by the Holy Spirit,
welcomed the word of life
in the depths of your humble faith:
as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One,
help us to say our own “yes”
to the urgent call, as pressing as ever,
to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

Obtain for us now a new ardour, born of the resurrection,
that we may bring to all, the Gospel of life
which triumphs over death.

Give us a holy courage to seek new paths,
that the gift of unfading beauty
may reach every man and woman.

Amen.²⁰

²⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 288.