

# A Life of Praise

## *A Meditation on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

‘My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.’

At the end of every Christian year we celebrate the Solemn Feast of Christ the King. In our imagination and in art we see Him crowned, in glorious robes, seated on His throne. We are taught to make Jesus King of our hearts and of our lives, but how is this to be achieved? In answer to that question I was pointed, and I point you, to the third verse of Psalm 22: ‘For You O God are Holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.’ The Book of Psalms is the heart of the Old Testament, of the Jewish Scriptures. It is a Temple of the praise of God. If we read and pray the psalms we encounter in them every aspect of human life and emotion – sorrow, despair, fear, anger (even anger with God), joy, prosperity, and all with a sense of God’s continuing and loving presence. We can say that throughout the psalms, whatever is being lived or felt, all of it is gathered up into



the praise of God. The psalms have no satisfying answer to the problems and sufferings of the world, except the reassurance that from every place and condition, human beings can offer a song of joy and thanksgiving. ‘Why are you cast down my soul, why groan within me?’ says Psalm 42. ‘Hope in God, I will praise him still, my saviour and my God.’ The psalms are the praying heart of the Church, which enthrones God as king by its continual praise.

But, you say, this is a Feast of Mary today. It is of course, but every Feast is also a Feast of Christ Himself. If the Book of Psalms is a Temple of the praise of God, then Mary is at the centre of that Temple. She would have known the psalms off by heart, and surely she would have taught them to Jesus at her knee. But much more than that, Mary embodies the psalms in herself as a throne of praise. She is the type of all people who enthrone Christ in their hearts and their lives by praising God. We envision Jesus as the Universal King, but we enthrone Him as we praise God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Mary’s hymn, the Magnificat, which we sing often and hear read in today’s Gospel, is one of pure praise of God. In it Our Lady gives glory to Him for all His gifts and graces to her and to all humankind, and especially to those who are poor in His sight. She recognises the inequalities of this world, inequalities of power and of resources. But she also expresses her faith in the goodness and mercy of God

which stretches from her forebears and into the future. And for that she praises Him. She has been given a marvellous destiny, one which she could hardly have fully understood at the time of the Visitation to Elizabeth. She was walking in faith, into the unknown, yet with her destiny confirmed by Elizabeth and even by the unborn Baptist. Later it would be further reinforced by old Simeon in the Jerusalem Temple, with a prophecy of Mary's own suffering as well as her Son's. Yet still she offers her praise to God. She is a true fountain of praise.

And it is not enough for Mary to praise her Lord in words alone. She praises Him with her life, as she shares the joys, the sorrows and the glories of her Son, as we reflect when we pray the Holy Rosary. In earthly terms she seems somewhat side-lined in the life of Jesus as described in the Gospels, barely featuring after the birth stories in Luke, and then only as an outsider requesting to see her Son, and appearing at the very end by His Cross. But in terms of the meaning and purpose of the life of Christ, and of His death, she is at the very centre, the background of praise for all that He is and does.



If we consider familiar images of the Blessed Virgin holding the Christ Child, especially ones where she sits on a throne herself as the Seat of Wisdom, as in the Walsingham image – that image reminds us that Mary is the perfect throne for God, a throne of perfect praise. Mary embodies praise, she has a pure heart and a right spirit; her praise is not dimmed by sin or earthly preoccupation, and even death cannot stifle it. That is what we proclaim in this Feast. Now she is enthroned in heaven where she praises God and shares his glory for all eternity.

Christ is our King. We are to enthrone Jesus in our hearts and lives, in word and in deed, and Mary is our finest example of this. If we focus on God, offering continual praise in all circumstances of life, good and bad, then we receive the gifts and graces which Mary was granted. One of my favourite prayers which sums up this attitude to life is that of St Thomas More, who suffered so much under King Henry VIII, in body and spirit, who once had so much but was left with so little. His response was completely in tune with Mary's. 'I thank you, Lord,' he prayed, 'for all that you have given me, for all that you have taken from me, for all that you have left me.'

In effect this is an expression of our dependence, of our poverty in the face of God, but also a recognition of the wonderful gifts He has to offer us if only we come before Him as His children.

The Psalmist again says:

‘Let my mouth be filled with your praise, O God, that I may speak of your goodness all the day long.’ (Ps.71.8)

Yes, let us offer God our own Magnificat, praising Him for his blessings to us whatever our circumstances, praising Him most of all that He has chosen each one of us, as He chose Mary, to do some particular work for Him. And let us praise Him in our lives, by modelling ourselves on the faithfulness of Mary, by offering ourselves in service to others. Here in the Mass the Lord comes to us as He came to Mary at the Annunciation, and to Elizabeth at the Visitation. He comes as we break open the Scriptures and as we eat His pure Body and drink His precious Blood. Receiving in faith, with the openness and Mary and in a spirit of offering, we already begin to live in the Temple of God’s praise. We enthrone Jesus in our hearts as we give praise to God by our words and worship and our deeds. We follow Mary, and as her life of praise was fulfilled by her being lifted up to praise



God in heaven, so we hope and pray that we also may be with Christ, for ever singing His praise.

May our souls too, our whole being, ‘proclaim the greatness of the Lord’.

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*Address delivered on the occasion of*

*the Assumptiontide Festival*

*18th August 2018*