

Blessed Virgin Mary

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 15 August 2021

Readings: Isaiah 61 vv 10-end; Galatians 4 vv 4-7; and Luke 1 vv 46-55

A visit to churches in predominantly Roman Catholic countries in mainland Europe, especially perhaps around the date of the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which falls today, might lead one to be confused about the status of Mary in Christian belief.

But, even if there are occasional excesses, at least in the minds of many Anglicans, let alone those who might describe themselves as Protestants, Mary is honoured, above all, because she was willing to be the mother of God's son, Jesus.

Mary is perhaps more represented in art than any other woman. We find her depicted at a number of different stages in her life and her relationship with her son, Jesus:

- At the Annunciation, she is a prayerful and beautiful young woman.
- There is a huge variety of depictions of Mary in the Nativity scenes – joy, wonder, and much more.
- At Calvary and in the deposition of Jesus, the descent from the cross, she is the woman of sorrows, the Pietà.
- And in the pictures of Assumption, Mary is elevated into heaven, surrounded by cherubs and saints.

In relation to the Nativity pictures, it is common to talk of 'virgin and child' pictures. But that's not the whole story.

Especially in the East, they are icons of the incarnation; in other words, the focus is on Jesus.

Perhaps this is better than the Western extremes – at one end, some of the elements of the depiction of Mary appear to go beyond what we know for certain about Mary from the Bible and early Christian understanding; whilst at the other we find the deeply Protestant view that almost seems to airbrush Mary out of history. Neither of these views is right – neither fully reflects the meaning of Scripture.

On the contrary, Mary's role is clear and important in the New Testament. But Mary is resolutely self-effacing: for example, at the Annunciation and at the wedding feast at Cana, where she deftly turns the focus to Jesus.

This is not the downplaying of a woman. All the great saints have exactly the same quality of focussing people not on themselves but on Jesus, drawing us to him all the time. There is no place in Scripture, or in authentic Christian witness, for personality cults.

But Mary is a something of a conundrum. She is clearly important because she was the woman who gave birth to Jesus. But how do we describe her?

The early Church needed to define Mary's place in our 'salvation history'. Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) led to the definition of Mary as *Theotokos* ('God-bearer'). This was based on their clear conviction that Christ is both fully human and fully divine – the redeemer who enters fully into the human condition. He was born into

the world through the willing co-operation of Mary, the Blessed Virgin. That is what we proclaim in the Creeds, which belong not to one tradition of Christian experience, but to the whole Church of God.

Since an edict by Pope Pius XII in 1950, proclaimed under the doctrine of 'papal infallibility', the Roman Catholic Church teaches as dogma (an article of faith revealed by God and proclaimed by the Church) that the Virgin Mary 'having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory'. This encapsulates a tradition that can be traced back to the early centuries of the Christian Church. The Orthodox churches differs slightly from the Roman Catholic interpretation, but still places great significance on the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The Church of England and other churches of the Reformation tradition are not generally willing to make such statements about Mary, but the principal festival of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Church of England's calendar is 15 August (for good ecumenical reasons, as I have tried to explain in this week's newsletter) – the day on which the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the feast of the Assumption.

Whatever our differences in some particulars, Mary undoubtedly has a significant place in our understanding of who Jesus is – even if the language of poetry rather than precise definition is sometimes needed to give this full expression.

And Mary's song, the Magnificat, which we heard as the Gospel reading today and which is at the heart of Evening Prayer, still challenges and inspires us. And thus, as Mary always does, she draws us closer to God.