

BIBLICAL REFLECTION *for the Feast of the* **BLESSED VIRGIN MARY**

(15 August)

[based around Isaiah 61:10-11 & Luke 1:46-55]

When the Church calendar reinstated August 15th as the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary just a few years ago, a few eyebrows were raised, not necessarily against the idea itself, but because of the date's association with a much more elaborate moment in the original pre-Reformation version of the calendar. August 15th is, as far as a more catholic schedule is concerned, the day when celebrations are held to mark the Assumption of the Virgin to Heaven. A loaded image, raising intriguing theology, and – inevitably – destined to cause controversy and division. Why? Because to 'assume' your way into heaven implies that you did not die, but simply passed from human life to eternal life in a way not dissimilar to Elijah with his chariots and horsemen, or Jesus with His resurrection and ascension. For the Virgin Mary to be assumed into God's nearer presence has a sense of her almost being the 'fourth' dimension of the Trinity, if such could exist. For the Church of England to restore August 15th to its calendar certainly had 'baggage'.

But for many – and clearly for the powers-that-be at the time – restoring August 15th seemed the right and proper thing to do; prior to this, the Blessed Virgin Mary was marked in September on the date representing her birth, with nothing much else to go on at that time. That seemed unfair theologically – why? Because we cannot dismiss the character as being unimportant to the wider story of the wonder that is Jesus Christ. As any parent among you knows, and as any of us children will acknowledge, life would not – nor could not – exist without a mother. Science has, so far – and thankfully thus – failed to replicate this unique and significant role in the evolution of humanity. We simply could not exist without our mothers. Jesus – if God's plan for His human dimension was to be fulfilled – needed a mother. Mary provided that role.

A role indeed that was to be far more than merely a conduit for the biological process, and it is to this wider dimension that we should turn our attention, for it is in her role as that mother within the theological framework that her status and significance transforms. We could be controversial and use language such as Mother of God, which sounds loaded but probably is not; we could view her in a simple motherly caring role, which seems OK. We could also view her as a vital part of the jigsaw that is our faith, for her resolute presence throughout the storyline reveals a key role in its formation.

It is as an example of perfect humanity that we could view the Blessed Virgin Mary. As we acknowledge her uniqueness, so we can also share in it by way of being inspired and motivated in our own faith. Mary's quiet presence, running as a thread through the whole story, enables us to see how we too might be as we evolve in our relationship with God. Hers was, and will forever remain so, utterly separate from anything we could ever hope to achieve – her very status dictates that – but what we can do is realise that by it we too can grow and formulate patterns and thoughts that in some ways replicate her qualities of love, devotion, belief, acceptance and honour towards God. If her reward for such was indeed assumption into heaven, then it was rightly earned; if by being inspired by

her we too establish a firm faith, then we have every reason to believe God will equally be alongside us.

The power within the character comes at the very start through the great vocation she agreed to fulfil – and when we look at our own faith, we too can see that it was that deep-seated realisation of God's intervention in our mere human lives that transformed such, and brought us to follow destiny's alternative path. Whoever we are, and whatever we have become was triggered by this moment – a moment when all else was overshadowed by the presence of God. In Mary, a profoundly significant task lay ahead – in each of us a similarly unique yet vital role was being anticipated. Our presence in the here-and-now of our faith reminds us of this trigger moment; Mary, too, can do the same.

And so a path is set, leading we know not where, encountering who knows what, and experiencing all manner of dramas. Mary journeyed, as we must, towards and through the aspects of life that unfolded before her. She saw her Son evolve into the character that history now views as the Christ, whether they believe in Him or not. She reminds us of His humanity yet reveals through her devotion His great divinity, for the conception story is cemented for all time, and no one can take that away from her. Our more Protestant friends may well dismiss her as seemingly irrelevant, yet the Jesus they so strongly subscribe to could not be without her. We must never forget that, nor necessarily allow them to!

Her passion for her Son led to His Passion, that great story which unfolds every Holy Week, and brings to our attention the wonder of the True Christ through resurrection. That divinity, born through and within Mary's vocational role, transforms humanity for ever – and standing alongside Him is none other than His mother. She never failed Him, she devoted herself to Him, she journeyed to the end with Him. Such example is not a bad one for us to subscribe to and provides a useful check-list at moments like this: have we ever failed Jesus? Are we still devoted to Him? Do we feel able to continue the journey of faith alongside Him? Do we want to be with Him? Her answer to that final question reveals itself through the image of the Assumption – and as such suggests to us that we should aim to follow suit. Why should she not be assumed into God's presence – after all, is that not what we would all like?

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