

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Follow me, if you will, on a journey of the imagination. We are in Venice, that wonderful romantic destination, Pearl of the Adriatic, a city built entirely on water. We are standing outside the great Church of the Franciscan Friars. We move into the tall, cool, brick interior and gaze down the nave, through the choir screen to glimpse a great work of art, an altarpiece by local artist, Titian dominating the far distance. There in rich colours, soaring heavenwards, surrounded by angels is Mary. Below, the apostles cluster round her empty grave and look upwards as she rises up, up, upwards into the blue empyrean. One disciple turns to another and comments, "*Hooray, and up she rises!*" I'm sorry, far too frivolous I know, but a sermon for a feast as glorious as this one most surely is deserves more than one text, so I offering you two. My first you have just heard. It is, as you all know, from the chorus of an 18th-century English sea-shanty! "*Hooray, and up she rises. . . !*" but to inject at once the note of high seriousness which you have all learnt to expect from a Chaplain to the Queen, my second text is from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 30: "*Those whom God predestined, he also called; and those whom he called, he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified.*"

Surely today, a number of questions come to mind. Why are we here? What do we mean by the various curious expressions used to describe this feast? They vary from the sober, Anglican name "*The Blessed Virgin Mary*", through the Orthodox "*Dormition*" or "*Falling Asleep of the Blessed Virgin Mary*" through to the Western "*The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*"? Why are we here? This where the words of my first text come in useful: "*Hooray, and up she rises.*" "*Hooray*" because we are celebrating and *Hooray* is a good celebration word - almost as good as *Alleluia*! "*Up she rises*" because we are celebrating the glorious entry into the heavenly places of Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God. Yes, we are celebrating the heavenly birthday of the Mother of God. We are celebrating a centuries-old belief that when the course of her earthly life was finished Mary was taken up, body and soul, into the glory of heaven. "*Hooray, and up she rises!*"

Why do we believe this and how does this belief impact upon our lives as Christians in this place? Alongside our "*Hoorays*" and "*Alleluias*" and to give our celebration a firm foundation, we need to ask these questions. The cause of our joy today is very ancient. Belief in Mary's miraculous preservation from the corruption and decay of death, that she was taken directly into the glory of her Son - that she was "*assumed into heaven*" as the Church puts it - first appears in the Jerusalem Liturgy in the 4th century and in sermons and teachings of the Church Fathers in the early 5th century. The belief that certain, especially honoured persons, do not die as we do but journey straight to heaven, body and soul, is much older and can be found in Scripture. Moses, whose bones were never found, was rumoured to have been translated to glory. The Letter to the Hebrews (11:15) quoting Genesis, tells us that Enoch "*did not experience death:*

and he was not found, because God had taken him"; and we have all read in the 2nd chapter of the 2nd Book of Kings how Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind to heaven in the presence of Elisha, his disciple and successor. Mary's death is not mentioned in Scripture but her earthly life must have come to an end and we are at liberty to apply scriptural principles and teachings to our exploration of what happened to her.

Belief that Mary was taken straight into the presence of God at the end of her earthly life was very dear to English hearts before the terrible rift in our religious life we call the Reformation. Many of the mediaeval churches of our land dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary are dedicated to the mystery of her Assumption and so celebrate their feast of title on this day, the 15th August. Indeed, the celebration never quite departed from the memory of the Church of England in spite of the Reformation and the Calendars of our ancient universities, Oxford and Cambridge retain the feast in their Books of Common Prayer to this day. Great Anglican divines, like Thomas Ken, Bishop of Bath and Wells in the 17th century, kept the feast and taught their people its significance. This evening, at Norwich Cathedral, they will sing his lovely words in a hymn which clearly shows his belief in the Assumption of our Lady:

*Heaven with transcendent joys her entrance graced,
Next to his throne her Son his Mother placed;
And here below, now she's of heaven possest,
All generations are to call here blest.*

With our Hymnbooks, our worshipping traditions, and our devotional poetry, this teaching spread throughout the Anglican world, wherever the Anglo-Catholic missionary societies took the Faith. So this is no fringe activity we are indulging in today. We are celebrating in the mainstream of Christian belief down the centuries and across the Reformation. Our "*Hooray, and up she rises*" is echoed through the Church and down the centuries as men and women everywhere honour Mary the Mother of the Lord.

But why are we celebrating this event? Why our "Hoorays"? Fair enough, most of us would concede that Mary is a special case - more special than Enoch or Moses or Elijah - and in a way it is not surprising that God, who singled her out from all humanity for the immense, unthinkable privilege of being the mother of his Son, should also single her out to join her Son in heaven, body and soul, when her earthly life had ended. But that is not the point, really. The key lies in the words of my second text which can be understood particularly to refer to Mary: "*Those whom God predestined, he also called; and those whom he called, he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified.*" Our Lady was predestined, called, justified and so she entered into God's glory. But when St. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, he is telling them that God has called us *all* to share his glory. Mary experiences her reward in the spectacular manner envisaged by Titian because she, "*our tainted nature's solitary boast*", alone cooperated fully with God's plan and God's call to glory. She is welcomed

into heaven as the model - the exemplar, if you like - of every good Christian; and the reward she gains is the one we all hope, some day, to receive. *"As Mary is drawn body and soul into the life of heaven, so we see what we are called to be."* This is our Christian hope.

Our forebears sometimes called this feast "Christmas in Harvest". Christmas, because it is about a birthday - our Lady's heavenly birthday. And a "Christ Mass" because everything we believe and celebrate about our Lady is ultimately about Christ. Harvest, not only because of the time of year but also because it is about God harvesting the first fruits of his Son's resurrection. Our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters, however, think of this feast as the "Easter of the Mother of God" and so also give thanks for Mary's share in the Paschal victory, her part in her Son's triumph over death. And so it is also in this Easter context that we are able to speak of her bodily assumption into heaven.

In the Creed we will say in a moment we profess our belief in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come and St. Paul takes time in several of his epistles to expound his own belief in the transformation of our earthly bodies into spiritual bodies, fit for life in the presence of God. Our Lady's virgin body, singled out by God in order to bear his Son in her womb, was similarly singled out that at her death it passed directly into the presence of God. This, too, is our hope. Our sinful bodies will be changed into spiritual bodies not least by our frequent reception of Holy Communion when *"our sinful bodies"* are *"made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood."* Our poor bodies will be changed, as in the words of the hymn:

*O how glorious and resplendent,
Fragile body, shalt thou be,
When endued with so much beauty,
Full of health, and strong, and free,
Full of vigour, full of pleasure
That shall last eternally!*

So, if our Lady, body and soul, is now in heaven, enthroned, as Bishop Ken reminds us, next to her Son, it is also God's will that we, predestined, called, justified, and glorified, will ultimately join her there. Of course we shout, *"Hooray, and up she rises"* for today heaven has thrown open its gates to receive the woman who gave birth to the One whom nothing can contain. Today the earth gives back to heaven the woman who was the source of Life. Today the angels gaze upon the woman who gave birth to the Principal of Life and who now moves up from life to Life. Therefore, we who share her humanity and the humanity she gave her Son, celebrate her assumption into his glory where she is the beginning and pattern of the Church in its perfection and a sign of hope and comfort for us all.