

## The Glorious Virgin Mary

A Sermon by the Rector

*Revelation 12.1* There appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.

This text comes from that great vision given to S John near the end of his life, a vision of God's glory, the purpose he has for this world, and the means he will use to achieve that purpose. Chapter twelve of that vision tells how John saw this great and wonderful figure of a woman, who was ready to give birth to a child. It talks too about a great red dragon which was waiting to seize the child the minute he was born. But John tells us that when the child was born the woman was carried off into a safe place prepared for her by God, and the dragon was defeated.

This vision is a bit like some of the parables of our Lord where figures in the story stand for other figures, and where there is a deeper meaning behind what is actually told. The red dragon is, of course, Satan, the power of evil; and the woman and her child are Mary and Jesus. What the vision shows in colourful language is that though the devil knew that the birth of our Lord was the beginning of the end for him, and though he tried his utmost to destroy Jesus, yet God triumphed and saved his Son.

The vision talks only about the birth of Jesus and then as though he was immediately safe, but we know how much happened between these two events. Those who first read the Revelation of S John knew well of the attack of Herod, the temptations in the wilderness, the sufferings and crucifixion of Jesus. But they also knew that our Lord held out against all temptations to sin right to the bitter end, and in the triumph of the Resurrection demonstrated his victory over Satan.

S John's vision is, however, concerned with our Lady. It testifies that this woman clothed in glory, with the brightness of the sun like a halo round her entire body, and a crown on her head made up of the stars of the universe, this wonderful figure is none other than the humble girl who said to God: "Be it unto me according to thy word." Of course, it is possible that God could have saved mankind in all sort of ways, but the way he chose (and still chooses) is by using men and doing nothing without our free consent. So we may indeed say that Mary's action began our salvation. And she continued to help God in his work of salvation right to the end of his incarnate life. At the last moment, when he hung on the cross, there she was, full of sorrow at what men can do to sheer goodness, but at the same time praying for them with her Son "for they know not what they do." And as at Bethlehem she had received the naked body of her Son from her womb, so on Calvary she received that same body and buried it in the tomb.

After the Resurrection, the only thing we hear about our Lady in scripture is that at Pentecost she was sitting in the middle of the apostles when the Holy Spirit came down on them. She was there at the birth of the Church as she had been there at the birth of the master of the Church. As she is the mother of Christ by nature, so she is the mother of the Church by her relation to him who is the head of the Church. On the Cross, Jesus said to John: "Son, behold your Mother" and that was addressed to all Christians for all time: she is our mother because she is the mother of him who is our brother.

All we know of the end of her life is contained in early Christian documents which are not included in the Canon of Scripture. There we read that at her death she was again surrounded by the apostles and at the moment of her death was carried in the sight of them all into heaven. The parallels with our Lord's ascension from the mountain into the clouds are obvious. His sinless body could not corrupt as does any normal human body, and so he returned to heaven with it complete. And so did our Lady. Her sinless body had already reached that state of perfection which fitted it for life in the heavenly places; so it too was not able to remain and corrupt.

What the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary teaches us is this: we are all of us preparing within us a spiritual body fit to live with God. The seed for this body was planted in our baptism and it has been growing ever since, fed by our prayers and the holy sacrament. As bread and wine feed our natural bodies,

so this interior spiritual body is nourished and strengthened every time we receive the Blessed Sacrament. And so all of us, when we come to die, have prepared some sort of spiritual body ready for the next life. But with many of us, that body will not be very far on. It may be stunted at certain periods when we stopped praying or neglected the sacraments. Even after death there will be a good deal for us to do to develop fully our spiritual bodies to their full-grown stature.

But with our Lady this was not the case. Her life on earth was one of perfect obedience to God's will, and by the time she came to die she lived only for the love of God and loved all men for his sake. So for her the natural body and the spiritual body were almost the same thing. The story of the Assumption signifies that Mary in her perfection was entering immediately into heaven.

And she is there now, a perfect human being who has reached the goal we are all striving for. It is because of this that we should never hesitate to ask her for help in this journey of ours. Those who think that prayer to our Lady somehow takes away something from our devotion to our Lord are quite wrong. Mary's entire life was spent helping her Son, and all that she did was for him and his Father. And can we believe that it is any different today? All she does for us now is done in the name of her Son. And all the honour and devotion we give her is given straight to her Son. She keeps nothing for herself but purifies all that we have asked and gives it to our Lord.

Remember what happened in Cana of Galilee. The servants confided in Mary that they had run out of wine, and Mary at once turned to Jesus and told him what was wrong. And Jesus, although it would seem that he had no intention of beginning his miracles like this, tells them what to do. They draw some water and find that it has been transformed into the best wine they had ever tasted.

Well, so it is today. We are not being foolish and credulous when we go to Mary and ask her in all simplicity for our needs and those of our loved ones. We are rather being like those little children who alone will inherit the kingdom of heaven. And what happened at Cana will happen in our case. Mary will share our prayer with our Lord and he will provide us with what we need, and often with something much more wonderful than the thing we asked for.

God gave Jesus to the world through Mary in Bethlehem. God still gives Jesus and his grace to the world through Mary when we, in the silence of our hearts, pray to her. Our prayer is received by Mary our Mother in the perfect state of heaven, and what we ask is purified by her and passed on to her Son.

In the Divine Praises at Benediction, when we say "Blessed be her glorious Assumption" we are praising God for the knowledge and assurance that at least one perfect human person has reached the goal of heaven and is living the life of love with the three divine Persons, that same life which we begin to live here whenever we reach out in love for other persons and give ourselves for them. The lives of our Lord and of our Lady on earth were entwined in relationships of love and service, and the doctrine of the Assumption is a surety to us that these values are not cut off by death, but that they grow and deepen and reach their fulfillment in the life to come.