

A Sermon for the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin (transferred), August 16, 2009

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We've interrupted the long sea of green the last couple of weeks by moving two major feasts forward. Last week, the Transfiguration. This week Mary, the mother of our Lord.

As a reformed and catholic church, we come to the feast of the Mother of God being pulled in two directions. On the one hand, the Reformation emphasized the Bible and much historical devotion to Mary is based on tradition that is not in the Bible. On the other hand, a catholic view of the faith, a perspective that seeks to follow what was believed anciently, everywhere and by all, leads one to discover that Mary has always been honored by the church as the chief of all the saints.

We ought to think as highly of Mary as of any other human being who has ever lived, save our Lord himself. For she is the one woman in all of history—the one woman among billions—that God chose to bear his Son. As her cousin Elizabeth said to her, “Blessed art thou among women.”

Our gospel today is Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). St. Luke tells us that Mary spoke these words after her cousin told her she was pregnant with the Messiah. Magnificat highlights the theme of Mary's life. God took notice of the lowliness of Mary and lifted her up so that all generations call her blessed.

This is the story of Israel. God chooses those who are insignificant and lifts them up to the place of honor. He called Abraham to leave ancient Babylon and made him the Father of many nations. He chose Moses, a baby abandoned in the Nile, and caused him to triumph over Pharaoh. He chose David, the youngest and least likely son of Jesse, to be king.

Magnificat is derived from the Old Testament Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. Hannah was one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. The other wife had many children, but Hannah was barren—a situation the other wife enjoyed telling Hannah about. Hannah prayed to God and God answered her prayer. She became pregnant with Samuel.

Samuel was born at a time when the tabernacle in Israel was being run by corrupt priests, just as Jesus was born at a time when the temple ministry was corrupt. The birth of each was met with a prophesy—Hannah's Song and Magnificat—that proclaimed the downfall of the arrogant and proud who were currently in power, and the lifting up of the lowly—Samuel and Jesus. As Hannah said, “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength.” And as Mary said, “He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek.”

We say Magnificat at Evening Prayer each day because Mary's Song is our song also. Jesus lives within us through the Holy Spirit, a situation analogous to the way Mary bore Christ. Christ in us is the sign of God's favor and the assurance that God will defeat our enemies—the world, the flesh and the devil and exalt us to glory also.

Today we celebrate the death, or falling asleep, of Mary. There is a tradition, dating back to the fourth century that not only the soul of Mary went to be with God, but also her body. Roman Catholic dogma holds that her body was assumed into heaven, though for them it appears to be an open question as to

whether she actually died. The Eastern Orthodox believe that Mary died a normal death, but was raised from the dead three days later, receiving at the time the new body we hope to receive at the end of time.

As Anglicans, we accept the tradition of the ancient and undivided church. However, we make a distinction between things that are revealed in the Bible and necessary to believe for salvation, and parts of the tradition about which the Bible, and the earliest tradition, are silent. The Anglican mind is comfortable with agnosticism about things that are not clear in the revelation. We focus on the central, biblical aspects of the revelation, and focus less on things that are further from the center.

What about praying to Mary? This is a frequent concern and question. The church has always believed that departed saints pray for the church in the world, inasmuch as they are able, just as we commend the departed to God in prayer. This is the doctrine of the Communion of the Saints, which teaches us that death does not break the ties that bind us in Christ.

In the western church in the Middle Ages, two tendencies muddled the ancient idea. First was the notion that saints were nicer, more sympathetic intercessors than Jesus. This notion arose in the time when the image of Jesus as judge prevailed. People were afraid to face the judge and it was thought they might negotiate a better deal with his mother or some other saint. Second was the idea that saints had excess merits that could be applied to our account through prayer. To invoke a saint in prayer was like making a withdrawal from a bank.

Anglicans reject both of these notions because they contradict the plain scriptural teaching that Jesus is the one mediator between God and man. The sense of the prayers of the saints is that just as I might ask you to pray for me tomorrow, so we might ask the departed who are in God's presence to pray for us also. To say, "Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us," is not very different, in concept, than saying to a friend, "Pray for my surgery next week."

Of course, we don't know how such an arrangement works. We do not believe that the departed hear and see everything we do. I, for one, have never been comforted by the oft repeated claim that one of our dear departed is "looking down on us." I like my privacy! St Augustine suggested that angels communicate the requests of the living to those who are "with Christ." Clearly, this is one of those things about which we do not know.

And it is not that important. We don't know what specific things the prayers of the saints may accomplish and that is not the point. To pray with "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven" is to express our communion with the saints throughout all ages, among whom the Mother of God is preeminent. The point is that we do not pray alone. We always pray in and with the whole church.

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