

FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION ST MARY'S NORTH MELBOURNE

15 August 2018

Isa 61:10-11; Ps 45:11-18; Gal 4:4-17; Luke 1. 39 – 55

+++++

I am honoured to be here with you this evening for your Feast of Title. St Mary's was the parish that my husband Trevor and I attended for many years when we lived near here and it is really good to see old friends in the congregation. I want to thank Father Craig – whom I trained with at Trinity – for his warm hospitality. I'm looking forward to saying hello to everyone at dinner afterwards.

This Feast for the Virgin Mary on 15th August each year is very ancient, having been observed since the sixth century, first in the eastern parts of the Church, moving over the centuries to the West. It was at that time a feast marking the Assumption, that is, the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven at the end of her life, without her having died. (This evening's reading from Galatians is regarded as the main scriptural warrant for this belief). However, the feast has not been so widely observed in recent centuries within Anglicanism. This changed around the year 2000 when the Feast was included again in the calendar of the Church of England, after it had been removed more than four centuries ago at the Reformation. And now we have it in the calendar of the Anglican Church of Australia as well. 'Assumption' has been dropped from the name of the feast in each case, and it is now often called simply, a feast for 'Mary the Mother of our Lord'.

This revival in observation may have occurred in the Anglican Church only in the last twenty years or so, but my firm recollection is that St Mary's kept its feast of title on this day in the 1980s – which is as far as my memory goes back here. That was in accordance with Anglo-Catholic practice. So, the Anglican Church of Australia can be said to have finally caught up with St Mary's. In this way, as in many others, St Mary's can be said to be a leader in things liturgical.

At St Mary's in the 1980s, we used to call this day 'the Feast of the Dormition', in deference to members of the congregation who were vocal in expressing their doubts about the Virgin Mary having been assumed bodily into heaven. 'Dormition' was a more neutral word from which one could infer assumption if one wished, or alternately a more ordinary death. Father Craig assures me that Assumption versus Dormition is no longer a hot issue here at St Mary's. I'm relieved not to have to preach on it and I am certain you are relieved not to have to listen to such a sermon.

THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY SEEM

And now to our gospel reading from St Luke. May I start by asking you whether you've seen the ad on TV where a man is repairing and renovating the backyard cubby house that's used by his two young daughters? Nothing is quite as it seems in this ad. But you need to look closely if you are to see that. For example, the newspaper the man's wife is reading is actually printed upside down; the blue paint for the job magically becomes pink paint with sparkles; and somehow it is the dog's kennel that gets renovated while the cubby house stays dilapidated.

This is an ad for Spec Savers, a company that tests eyesight and makes glasses. But it's a wonderful analogy for the approach I think we should take as we reflect on this evening's gospel. We know it as one of the best known and loved stories of all the gospels, but in it, things are not as they seem at first sight, and through it we are given glimpses into the topsy turvy way in which God acts with us and our world.

THE VISITATION

In the story, the Virgin Mary, pregnant, has made the arduous journey from Galilee to the hill country of Judea, on her own, and has come to visit her older cousin, Elizabeth who is also expecting a baby.

Let us pause here for a moment. We are dealing here with the patriarchal culture of first century Palestine. A culture where women's lives were more or less confined to the domestic sphere, and where making such a long journey alone was unthinkable. Further, this was a world where no pregnant unmarried mother would dare to appear in public and specially where angels do not announce pregnancies, as Gabriel had done to Mary. Mary is being depicted by St Luke as a most extraordinary young woman. It was also a world where it was virtually impossible for women such as Elizabeth to become pregnant for the first time after many years of marriage. We realise that St Luke is signalling to us in all these ways that we are in the midst of something extraordinary, of events that go far beyond the ordinary and are in all practical terms, impossible. We are standing in this story surrounded by the mystery of God.

Mary and Elizabeth greet one another with joy. Elizabeth gives a blessing to Mary and her unborn child, even though she can't know that Mary is pregnant, and strongly entrenched custom is broken here as it was Mary, the younger woman, who would be expected to give a blessing to her older cousin. St Luke is reminding us here that the focus of the story is very much on Mary's unborn child, Jesus. And then Mary responds to Elizabeth, not with a blessing for her, but with a song of praise to God. This is the hymn or canticle which we know

in the Church by the name The Magnificat. It connects the lowliness of Mary's station in life and the sheer unlikeliness of her being the Bearer of God through her unborn child - links this with the God who is faithful to his promises to Israel.

GOD'S WAYS

It is a canticle put on the lips of Mary in our story but which was most likely written decades later by the evangelist - on the other side, in the light of, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, this is most assuredly the God who lifts the humble and raises those who have fallen; and who overthrows the structures that support the privilege of the powerful and the respectable. The canticle has a strong eschatological perspective – that is, a perspective which sees both what God is doing now in his world, and what will come to fulfilment only at the end of time. This is the God who does not do what is obvious or what the self-righteous or self-satisfied would expect. The God who makes the childless person fertile, and who places vulnerable and helpless people right at the heart of the way in which he is bringing salvation to this world. The God who makes what is blue pink and with sparkles. A God who makes all things straight, by way of crooked lines.

The story of Mary and Elizabeth and their meeting is full of the unexpected. Seemingly ordinary human events are opened out into the mystery of the divine and we are invited in to it. In the story we receive assurance somehow that we too are worthy of redemption in God's eyes. We SEE God's grace entering into the world.

My prayer for you on this your Feast of Title is that you may continue to know that you are the people of God in this place. And that you may continue to be counter-cultural within the Anglican Church - for the Anglo-Catholic tradition has always been such. That as an Anglican community you may remain open to the world, but counter-cultural to the world's values. And that you may continue to glimpse the mystery of God and of his Church.

The Lord be with you.