**Assumption of Our Lady**

**14th August 2022**

**First reading from the book of the Apocalypse 11;19, 12;1-6 & 10**

The word ‘Revelation’ as referring to the last work in the New Testament is first found in the Wycliffe Bible of 1384 and comes from a Latin root. The word ‘Apocalypse’ comes from an older Greek word meaning ‘unveiling’ The words are interchangeable and they both mean ‘the making known what has previously been hidden’.

One of Caravaggio’s paintings shows Matthew writing his Gospel. Over his shoulder is an angel whose hand directs Matthew’s. This idea of divine dictation was taken for granted, and many scholars assumed that as God was absolute truth, inerrancy must be a property of the Biblical Scriptures in every possible way. For centuries this had been the Jewish attitude to their Bible, that we call The Old Testament. As the generations passed, the New Testament fostered awe among Christians who treated it similarly. This encouraged the Church to trust the statistics in Leviticus and Numbers, the days of Creation in Genesis, and the story of Noah’s Ark to be historically accurate.

From the early 19th century there were huge strides in Archaeology, Palaeontology, Semantics and Linguistics and (especially German) scholars realised that the ‘Scriptures’ were no different to the contemporary writings of the same dates. Indeed the word ‘scripture’ simply means ‘writing’ and to be understood in context Biblical writings must be subjected to the same analysis as any others.

We use the phrase ‘Holy’ Scriptures, ‘holy’ meaning ‘different, special or separate’ but what makes them different is not the actual words used, but the subject matter, which is that of the Incarnation.

Understanding what the scriptures say is relatively straightforward when dealing with historical descriptions, such as the Crucifixion, but more difficult when the writer has ideas of the supernatural that are alien to us. Then heaven was a place above the blue sky and hades another below our feet. So the stories of the Ascension and Assumption would make perfect sense when they were written, whereas we have to recast them as metaphysical truths.

This is further complicated because the woman in the first reading was not originally Our Lord’s Mother, but a personification of Israel who produced the Messiah. Additionally, his ‘birth’ (12;5) describes not his Nativity but his Crucifixion, which was the source of eternal life.

The opening sentence setting the stage is related to the incident when the temple veil was parted at the moment of Jesus’ death (Matthew 27;50-51) The reason is that because of Christ’s death, the heavenly sanctuary is now open to the world. Reconciliation with God is within the sight of all.

However we read the story, the woman is the mother of the Messiah, and Jesus is the Messiah, so it is perfectly logical to use the image to represent Our Lady. It is an opportunity by which we are able to credit her with the obedience and faithfulness for which she is otherwise known in the Gospel accounts.

It is a good example of how we may appropriately use the Scriptures for legitimate ends that the author never intended.

**Responsorial Psalm 44;10-12, 16**

Another example of how we can reasonably ascribe new meaning to a passage from an earlier era may be seen in the Psalm for to-day.

The Psalm we use on the feast of the Assumption had its origin in the Royal Court in Jerusalem. The occasion could be that of a Royal Wedding. There are four couplets set in two pairs. The first line is addressed to the King saying that his court contains the daughters of the kings of the surrounding nations. These are the bridesmaids of the new Queen who occupies the most important position, at the right hand of the King and wearing gold of Ophir, which was probably what we call Somalia.

The psalmist goes on to advise the bride to forget her father’s homeland and embrace that of her new husband, who will make her his Queen. And it concludes referring again to the bridesmaids who accompany them.

It is chosen for this feast because it reminds us of the much later fulfilment of this picture in that of Our Lady being received into the heavenly court as a Queen as in the first reading from the Apocalypse.

**A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians 15;20-26**

As time passed, so Church members started to die and their relatives became concerned that they had missed out on the Lord’s return. Paul writes to reassure them in this passage as he did in the earlier 1 Thessalonians 4;13-18. So the second reading speaks of the first disciples to benefit from Christ’s victory over death, and we read it here because his Mother was one of them.

**A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 1:39-56**

The Gospel is the story of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth following her visit by Gabriel. We read it, frankly, because we have no account of her Assumption in the Gospels. In antiquity there were several alternative endings to Our Lady’s earthly life but the Assumption expressed most closely the popular belief in the Western Church. (The Orthodox follow a different tradition)

The story contains the Canticle we call the Magnificat from its opening word. It is closely modelled on the song of praise that Hannah sang when she was told that she was to give birth to Samuel. (1 Samuel 2;1-10)

Notwithstanding the above, the provenance is not unchallenged. Hannah was past child-bearing when she conceived Samuel after many years of ungranted prayer. She swore that she would dedicate her son to the service of Yahweh. So, Hannah’s situation prefigures that of Elizabeth rather than that of Mary.

Also, when Irenaeus (125 to 202 A.D.) quoted this canticle, he did so as if it was being recited by Elizabeth. A few manuscripts also attribute it to Elizabeth, but whoever Luke intended to be the speaker, it is a magnificent hymn, composed in classical Hebrew style.

The word Magnificat means to magnify, which does not mean to ‘make greater’ but ‘to see in greater detail’ and this is what Our Lady does throughout her life, and even continues to-day enabling us to see God in greater detail.

The role of Our Lady gained emphasis over the first few centuries and in common culture has been misrepresented as an alternative to the role of Jesus. This is evident in some South American countries and in Protestant polemic. However, in truth, any devotion to Our Lady is only because of her Son and all virtue ascribed to her only increases our respect for Him. Although we credit her with sinlessness, it is obtained through his work of atonement as much as ours.

He has primacy but she is also unique for she is, as the Greeks call her, the *Theotokos*, or ‘the one who carried God in her womb’.