



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Sunday 11.00 Holy Eucharist 16th August 2020
The Assumption of our Lady

Last week I had a family holiday in Ramsgate, an unpretentious friendly harbour town where we enjoyed being by the sea in the heatwave. I was thinking guiltily about those of you who heatwaved in London – not a nice place to be when the mercury hits the 30s.

Ramsgate is associated with several interesting historical figures, Van Gogh stayed there, as did Wilkie Collins the writer. Its most significant figure was Augustus Pugin, architect of the Gothic revival, Big Ben, the interior of the House of Commons and many English churches. In Ramsgate, he built a church in honour of St Augustine who landed nearby in 597 to establish the church in England, becoming the first Archbishop of Canterbury. Pugin's church in Ramsgate now holds relics of St Augustine, pieces of bone from his body.

The veneration of relics stretches back to the first few centuries of the Christian church, when the mortal remains and items associated with the apostles and martyrs began to be placed in churches and used for devotion. The remains of St Peter are buried in St Peter's Basilica in Rome, those of St Paul are in the church of St Paul outside the Walls, also in Rome. St James' are in Santiago in Spain, St John's are in Ephesus and so on.

But the big question remains. Where are the remains of the Blessed Virgin Mary? Surely, if one was going to venerate relics, the most holy ones would be associated with her, who shared her DNA with her son Jesus.

In the 5th Century, the deeply devout wife of the Emperor Marcian requested the remains of the Blessed Virgin Mary to be brought to Constantinople to be enshrined there. However, the Bishop of Jerusalem at the time reported that her death had been witnessed by all the Apostles, but that when her tomb was later opened, it was found empty.

There were many apocryphal accounts of the death of Mary, some alleging that her body was assumed on the way to the burial, in others that it was raised after three days. If Moses and Elijah were taken directly into heaven, how much more should Mary, greater than they, not experience decay, the argument went.

August 15 marks the sixth of the Marian Feasts and lesser festivals in the Church of England, and is the observance of the departure of Mary from this world. Its official title is The Blessed Virgin Mary. In other churches and denominations it is known as the Falling Asleep of Mary, in the Orthodox tradition the Dormition and in the Roman Catholic church the Assumption. In the Anglican church there is no official dogma on this point. Some low church Anglicans would argue, along with Protestant denominations that Scriptural accounts do not have any reference to any supernatural occurrences surrounding her death, and that she is essentially a model of humanity, who died in the same way as any human being. There is a rationality about that, but the question for me remains, where are the blessed bones? Where are the primary relics?

The Orthodox church holds that Mary died a natural death, that her soul was received by Christ, and her body resurrected on the third day, and taken into heaven. Some Anglo Catholic Anglican churches would hold to that view. The Roman Catholic church pronounced that the Assumption was official dogma in 1950 – that Mary was assumed, body and soul into heavenly glory. Some Anglo Catholic Anglican churches would hold to that view.

This is all rather dry stuff, but what does it mean for us?

Firstly, that there is a mystery about the departure of the Blessed Virgin Mary from this earth, the mechanics of which no one will know this side of heaven. As Anglicans we have the privilege of holding a variety of opinions on this.

But...

Mary must be higher than all the saints, and deserving of a special veneration due to her unique role in the mystery of redemption. Her 'yes' was the catalyst to all that followed. Would what followed have happened without that 'yes'?

As the first Christian, the Mother of God and the Mother of the church, she shows that the feminine is incorporated into the divine 'A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars' as our first reading put it. 'Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed' she sings in her great song of liberation.

Mary shows us that both male and female are necessary in the work of salvation. 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord' cried Elizabeth, two women rejoicing in God's call to participate in the story of redemption.

Mary is also the Mother of Priests – she more than anyone could offer Christ to the world with the words 'this is my body, this is my blood'. Just as we know that we are surrounded by the prayers of a great cloud of witnesses, the holy ones of God, we know that as a loving mother listens to the prayers and requests of her children, Mary, especially, can be called upon for her intercession for the world.

May our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ grant us the courage, vision and unshakeable faith of his mother and may the prayers of Mary and all the holy ones of God surround us and help us to lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things and defeat the coronavirus.