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Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Date: Sunday, August 18, 2019 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: Revelation 11:19a, 12:1–6a, 10ab
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 45:10–12, 16 | **Response:** Psalm 45:10bc
Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:20–27
Gospel Acclamation: Mary is taken up to heaven; a chorus of angels exults.
Gospel Reading: Luke 1:39–56
Preached at: the Carmelite Monastery of Sr Thérèse in Benoni **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

The readings in our Mass today asks us, I think, to focus on God's victory over evil and God's power at work in Mary, and whether we allow it to work in ours lives as well.

When Pope Pius XII proclaimed Mary's Assumption in 1950, he called his document Munificentissimus Deus, meaning "the most generous God." Mary's Assumption was meant to be a demonstration of the overflowing generosity of God, and points us to a basic truth about God and his saving love for humanity: That God desires us to live with Him forever in our full humanity, body and soul. By taking Mary up to heaven, body and soul, God showed us that he intends for us to live with Him in heaven, with resurrected bodies and satisfied souls, in God's presence at last.

Our readings today have been chosen to, in some way, help us understand this truth.

In our first reading from the Book of Revelation, we hear about John's vision of a cosmic heavenly battle between God and Satan… in broad strokes, the dragon is meant to represent the evil spirit, or Satan, or some have argued, the problem of evil in the world; and the woman, robed with the sun or the glory of God, is often interpreted as the chosen people of God in the Scriptures, or the Church, or in a special sense Mary, or perhaps even all of us who also battle against Evil in our own way.

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Now in this vision the Mother safely delivers the child and is then saved by God from what the dragon might have done to her. Many Christians see in this battle a foreshadowing of God triumphing over Evil, but because of the image of a mother, it's fair to also think of how God worked through Mary in this triumph, and I think that is why it's included in today's readings, to make us think what was it about Mary that helped good triumph over evil? And also, how would God have saved Mary from the last evil, death – which we hear about in the second reading?

In the second reading we hear how Paul understands the resurrection of the dead would occur. Paul suggests that God has an order he will follow: Christ first, then those who belong to him, then all others. If we take this a step further, then how fitting is it that Mary should be the first of those saved by Christ. As the mother of the one who saved us, she is, we believe, at the very head of the line of faith. This is because no disciple believed in her son before Mary did.

We also see how Paul in the second reading contrasts Adam and Christ. We know that sin entered the world through the pride of the original sin of Adam and Eve, and we see in the Gospel how Christ, the new Adam, entered the world through the humility and willingness to accept God's grace in Mary, sometimes called the New Eve. Her humility and willingness to allow God to use her is why all generations call her Blessed. But we also see in this 2nd reading how Christ came to destroy death. Death, the last enemy, will be put under his feet, it says. And in today's feast where we acknowledge that Mary is assumed body and soul into heaven, we see how God spares her death, bringing Mary into His presence, just as we will all be, at the appropriate time.

But I want to invite you to notice something else from the first reading, something that is perhaps a little shocking – and that is the presence of suffering, which I think we cannot fully separate from the gratitude of Mary expressed in the Gospel.

Notice the allusion in this first reading to the anguish of childbirth which preceded the woman's salvation.

In the Gospel, we read about Mary's visit to Elizabeth to comfort her as she prepares for childbirth. Several things happen here. Firstly, John the Baptist leaps for joy as he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and Elizabeth recognises Mary as the

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mother of the Lord. Secondly, we hear Mary being grateful to God in the beautiful words of the Magnificat where Mary praises God for all of his wonderful works.

Mary's Magnificat after careful study is very much a collection from the Scriptures, the hope of the Old Testament. We realise that just as she is carrying Jesus in her womb, she is also carrying the wisdom of the Word and that is revealed in what she says and how she speaks. We might wonder for ourselves this morning: how do we allow the Word of God to enter into our hearts, to enter into our lives. Can we carry God within us, in His Word, just as Mary carried the Word in herself?

Within the Magnificat there are essentially two movements: downward and upward – both constituting a sort of reversal: "God reverses human status and perception: in a downward movement, he scatters the arrogant, pulls down the mighty, sends the rich away empty. But God also, in an upward movement, exalts the lowly, fills the hungry, and takes the hand of Israel."

We know, because we know how Luke's Gospel ends, that Mary, the Mother of God, suffered. Our belief in Mary being without sin, and assumed into heaven, did not save her from suffering. We can recall how Simeon predicted that Mary's heart would be pierced by a sword at seeing Jesus' suffering, and we remember how much she must have suffered seeing her Son die on a roman cross.

I think the Feast of Assumption also has something to tell us about our own suffering. St Paul teaches that suffering in this life is rewarded by God in the next. This is also a reversal which is hinted at by Mary in her Magnificat where she expresses her gratitude and praise of God; it is also present in today's feast, where we are reminded that as Mary suffered with her Son in a unique way, she also shares in his glory in a unique way by being the first Christian to be assumed.

This link between gratitude, suffering and glory was brought home to me this week when I saw a wonderful interview on CNN between the comedian Stephen Colbert and CNN reporter Anderson Cooper.

They were talking about grief and suffering, life and death – themes we can find in our readings today – and Anderson, choking back tears, asked whether Stephen had said: "what punishment of gods are not gifts."

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Anderson, obviously affected by this statement, honestly asked: “Do you really believe that?”

And Stephen thoughtfully replied, “Yes, It’s a gift to exist and with existence comes suffering. There’s no escaping that”, he said.

Stephen then shared about how his father and two brothers died when he was young and that he did not, in his words, “learn to love the thing that I most wish had not happened” He said he realised it. It was a recognition, like, perhaps Elizabeth’s and John the Baptist’s recognition to love.

Stephen Colbert made the point that if you are grateful for your life, you’re grateful for all of it. He asked, “What do you get from loss?” he said “You get awareness of other people’s loss, which allows you to connect with that other person, which allows you to love more deeply and to understand what it’s like to be a human being if it’s true that all humans suffer.” He saw that suffering was part of being most human. And it was a reality that God wanted to feel so that He could empathise with us. He lost his Son to death so that death might be conquered.

I think that as we celebrate this feast of the Assumption, we can identify with Mary who suffered and lost more than we can ever imagine, and we can also find hope in her Assumption into glory. Since by taking his Mother bodily into heaven to be by his side, Christ made her a sign of the fact that we too will one day be taken up to be with Christ, finally perfected, we believe, in body and soul and where there will be no more suffering.

I said at the beginning that the readings in our Mass today asks us, I think, to focus on God’s victory over evil and God’s power at work in Mary.

God’s power is shown to us in the resurrection and his victory over evil, which includes the defeat of death. What we celebrate in today’s feast reminds us that we are destined to share in that resurrection and that victory.

We are left with one question: Can we also imitate the joy and gratitude of Mary of marvelling at the generosity of God’s work in our lives, even when we suffer?

Can we do the difficult thing and see everything as God’s gift?

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