

## *The Assumption of Mary*

### THE GOD-BEARER

*August 15th is the main Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the Armenian Church, and some other traditions, it is celebrated on the nearest Sunday and we follow that custom in celebrating the Mother of Jesus today. In the Catholic Church the feast is called the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the Orthodox Church the Dormition of the Mother of God.*

### INVOCATION

+ In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.  
We lift up our hearts in thanks and praise:  
**Glory to you, O God!**

### PRAISE

For Mary, Mother of the Lord  
God's holy name be praised,  
Who first the Son of God adored  
As on her child she gazed.

The angel Gabriel brought the word  
She should Christ's mother be;  
Our Lady, handmaid of the Lord,  
Made answer willingly.

The heavenly call she thus obeyed,  
And so God's will was done;  
The second Eve love's answer made  
Which our redemption won.

She gave her body for God's shrine,  
Her heart to piercing pain,

And knew the cost of love divine  
When Jesus Christ was slain.

Dear Mary, from your lowliness  
And home in Galilee,  
There comes a joy and holiness  
To every family.

Hail, Mary, you are full of grace,  
Above all women blest;  
Blest in your Son, whom your embrace  
In birth and death confessed.

#### PERSONAL REFLECTION

Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden:  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*As we come before God asking him to cleanse our hearts that we may worship and follow him in Spirit and in truth. In a time of silence reflect on your life in the last week, asking God to amend what is wrong, and to affirm what is good.*

*Then say:*

You were sent to heal the contrite:  
Father, have mercy.

You came to call sinners:  
Christ, have mercy.

You plead for us at the right hand of the Father:  
Holy Spirit, have mercy.

Almighty God have mercy upon me,  
forgive me my sins,  
and keep me in eternal life. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Gracious God,  
who looked with favour on the lowliness of Blessed Mary  
and chose her to be the mother of your only Son:  
grant that we who are redeemed by his blood  
may share with her in the glory of your eternal kingdom;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### READINGS

*Read: Isaiah 61.10-end*

*Verses from Psalm 45*

Your throne, O God, shall endure forever.  
A sceptre of justice is the sceptre of your kingdom.  
Your love is for justice; your hatred for evil.

Therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
with the oil of gladness above other kings:  
your robes are fragrant with aloes, myrrh, and cassia.

So will the king desire your beauty:  
he is your lord, pay homage to him.  
She is escorted amid gladness and joy;  
she passes within the palace of the king.

Listen, O daughter; pay heed and give ear:  
forget your own people and your father's house.  
So will the king desire your beauty.  
He is your lord, pay homage to him.

And the daughter of Tyre shall come with gifts;  
the richest of the people shall seek your favour.  
I will make your name forever remembered.  
The peoples will praise you from age to age.

*Read: Revelation 11.19 – 12.6 + 10*

#### ALLELUIA

Alleluia, alleluia!  
Mary has been taken up into heaven;  
all the choirs of angels are rejoicing.  
Alleluia!

*Read: Luke 1.46–55*

#### REFLECTION

Saints are usually celebrated on the anniversary of their death, their entry into glory. The traditional date for the death of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is 15 August, and yesterday in many countries, including the officially secular France, it was a major public holiday. Catholic Christians celebrate the Assumption; Orthodox Christians the Dormition of the Mother of God. I like the word *Dormition*; it means ‘falling asleep’, and expresses the belief that Mary died without suffering, in a state of spiritual peace.

The Bible is silent about Mary’s death. An early Christian writer called Hippolytus said that she lived for 11 years after the death of Jesus, dying in AD 41. What the Bible does record is the vision of John of Patmos (today’s second reading), which reflects Mary’s special place of honour among the saints – a special place of honour that is hers because she was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. Before God came close to us in his Son, he first came close to Mary. The Orthodox title for Mary is *Theotokos*,

meaning ‘the God-bearer’, and orthodox spirituality is about making every believer a God-bearer.

Mary has inspired a deep devotion among Christians. For most of my life I wasn’t touched by it, finding some of it a bit OTT, but in recent years I have felt a sense of regret that it was not part of my Christian upbringing. I have tried to understand this feeling of regret, and I think it’s to do with the affective aspect of faith.

Too often faith is intellectual, a set of propositions that we say we believe. But I’ve come to see faith more as a relationship: our relationship with God is where faith really begins; the beliefs come later. Relationships are about being shaped by those close to us, and the way Mary accepted God’s will for her and bore the pain that her acceptance brought her, are virtues that I would like to be mine more completely – more about who I am than about what I try to do, helping me to become a God-bearer. I find myself moved by the depth of devotion that Mary has inspired, especially in art and in music.

When I was at Ely Cathedral, from time to time the choir sang the anthem *Totus Tuus* (meaning ‘Completely Yours’), by the Polish composer Henryk Górecki. It is a setting of words by Maria Boguslawska:

O Mary!  
I am wholly thine, Mary,  
mother of our Redeemer,  
mother of God, holy virgin,  
mother of the Saviour of the world.  
Mary, I am wholly thine!

The sense of self-giving which the words and music evoke spoke to me deeply. I can still feel the experience.

Some years before, I’d come across the icon known as *The Mother of God of Tenderness*.



It was made in the twelfth century; the maker is unknown. It evokes the same sense of devotion, expresses the same relationship, as the anthem. Mary's 'Yes' to God brought her wonderfully close to him, a closeness that brought both joy and sorrow. Her joy is expressed in the *Magnificat* – a joy anticipated by Isaiah, as we heard in the first reading:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
my whole being shall exult in my God...

The sorrow came later, and as Mary holds her child, the artist has put that sorrow in her eyes. In her arms she cradles Jesus, and in her heart she holds the words of Simeon that he is destined to be rejected, and that a sword will pierce her own heart.

In this icon, it seems to me, the artist offers the mother as an image of God, an image echoed by his English contemporary, Julian of Norwich:

As truly as God is our father, so just as truly is he our  
mother. In our father ... we have our being; in our merciful  
mother we are made and restored.

*(Revelations of Divine Love)*

Julian reminds us that our image of God is too male. God is beyond gender. Both women and men are made in the image of God (*Genesis 1.27*), and in the icon we have a wonderful picture of this. The tenderness of the mother's embrace says much about God's forgiveness, and the closeness of the child to her says much about its effect. The movement in the icon is from the mother's eyes to her arms embracing her child to his arm encircling her neck. God holds us like our mother, and instinctively we hold fast to him.

Many years ago I read Ron Brownrigg's guide to the Holy Land, where he remarks that it would be sad indeed, if, when we reach the pearly gates, Jesus has to say, 'I don't think you know my mother?' His words have stayed with me. As this icon shows, getting to know Mary we will be wonderfully close to Christ, looking with compassion on his world.



*Pause and reflect.*

## RESPONSE

Ye who own the faith of Jesus  
Sing the wonders that were done,  
When the love of God the Father  
O'er our sin the victory won,  
When he made the Virgin Mary  
Mother of his only Son.  
*Hail Mary, hail Mary, hail Mary, full of grace.*

Blessed were the chosen people  
Out of whom the Lord did come,  
Blessed was the land of promise  
Fashioned for his earthly home;  
But more blessed far the Mother  
She who bare him in her womb.  
*Hail Mary, hail Mary, hail Mary, full of grace.*

Wherefore let all faithful people  
Tell the honour of her name,  
Let the Church in her foreshadowed  
Part in her thanksgiving claim;  
What Christ's Mother sang in gladness  
Let Christ's people sing the same.  
*Hail Mary, hail Mary, hail Mary, full of grace.*

## PRAYERS

*A time of free prayer and intercession. You might like to use this five-fold pattern:*

For the Church  
For the World  
For family, friends, neighbours and the local community  
For the sick and all in need, near and far



For those who have died

*At the end:*

Merciful Father, accept my prayers,  
for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

## CONCLUSION

Our Father...

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
be with us all, now and for ever. Amen.

## NOTE

***The Closeness of God's Coming** – three meditations before the icon of the Mother of God of Tenderness, are on the Advent page of my website:  
[www.peter-sills.co.uk/talks/advent](http://www.peter-sills.co.uk/talks/advent)*