

Lyn Valley Mission Community

The Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Isaiah 61: 10-end Ps 45: 10-end Galatians 4:4-7 **Luke 1:46-55**

In writing and reading, speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

This year, in this place, August 15th was a day of converging commemorations: it marked the 75th anniversary of the end of conflict with Japan in the Second World War, it was the anniversary of the Flood in this locality and a time of remembering local loss and personal bereavement. In the church calendar it is the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary – a feast particularly meaningful to the church of St Mary the Virgin in Lynton and the Sisters of Mary Morning Star at the convent.

And the day was shrouded in cloud in Lynton and Lynmouth, and perhaps across our whole region: the low mingling of sea mist and moorland cloud which reduces vision and softens sounds. It seems to me that in the mist, reducing what we can see and make sense of, and muting what we can hear to only what is close to us, is a good place to start.

When we look back at the end of the conflict in the Far East it remains difficult to see and make sense of things clearly. I can only imagine the mixture of exhaustion, relief and joy that the news that the war was over brought, along with it the enduring grief and pain of what had been suffered and the grim new reality of nuclear weaponry. I suspect that what was felt most strongly was what was closest – the impact on everyday life, the personal experiences of soldiers, families, those bereaved and those coming to terms with the lingering effects of what they had been through; but the celebratory knowledge too that at last the war was over, and step by step peace-time could be fully embraced again.

At a more local level, less than ten years later, long days of summer rain over Exmoor turned into the ravaging floods along the rivers down to Lynmouth. From my few years here I know that for some the memories of this are still raw: some express this in the desire for a continued marking of the date, for others it should pass quietly. We can look back with sorrow for loss, and we can find strength in the rebuilding of the community and the life we enjoy here now. Just as, at the death of a much loved member of the community now, a loss is grieved but a life is celebrated for all that family and friends treasure in their memory. All these events are difficult to see clearly and make sense of, but we do know the experience the deep feelings of what comes closest to us.

And as humans we can become quite good at holding the mysteries of sorrow and joy, grief and thanksgiving, confusion and hope together in remembrance and allowing the future to unfold from all that we experience – the sorrow and the joy.

Christian faith suggests that this resilience has something to do with being made in God's image.

Jesus shows us that God enters fully into all that human beings experience, into all that is closest to us, to draw everything towards his glorious future from within. Jesus walks in the mist with us – he shares and enhances the joy of a wedding, stands with friends at the mouth of their brother's tomb, he agonises alone in a night garden about accepting what is to come, suffers the torture and death that the cruellest can deal out and carries the marks of all he has experienced through death to be raised to new life which he promises to those he continues to be beside as they navigate their own sorrows and joys.

Amongst his human companions (that's all of us) are those that we call saints: those who somehow have discovered how to offer all sorrow and all joy of their lives to God as their worship, their gift to God for all they recognise that they have received. They manage, by God's grace, to trust God's presence in all that they experience. Trust in God's presence is not an answer to the question "why is this happening", but is an assurance that there is a future of hope and joy being birthed or resurrected. In their lives

we can see the action of God with some clarity: as a child once said, the saints are the people the light shines through. The same action is at work in our own lives – it is just things sometimes seem a bit mistier for us!

Perhaps of all the saints, this is most clearly true of Jesus' mother, Mary. Her cousin Elizabeth calls her "blessed among women" and in her song that we hear in today's gospel she knows that "all generations will call me blessed" – honoured by God, a person in whose life God is visible. The song shows that right from the beginning, from hearing that God is calling her to carry his Son, and her "yes" to that remarkable call, she has grasped that her own life, her body and soul, will be a place where people can see God at work.

She says: "my soul extols the Lord" because "The Powerful One has done great things for me" – in other words I will honour God by showing that God is the cause of all that I have been given. As the song continues she reflects on how she can see a pattern in God's action: drawing the lowly, humble and the hungry into a hopeful future. She sees the history of God's people, as a history of God's action becoming fully visible because it is the action of bringing hope to those who are not powerful in human terms.

If we look forward into her own life we can see God at work in her: the conception and birth of Jesus, her nurture and care of the Son of God through exile and childhood, to standing back and allowing him to enter into his own precarious ministry, her faithfulness to be with him even at his death, and her central place in the prayer of the new Christian community at Pentecost. But the life of this one "all generations will call blessed" is lived fully embracing the pain and suffering that human life brings too: possible stigma as an unmarried mother, exile in fear for the child's life, acceptance he is not going to settle down and follow Joseph into a steady artisan job, the opposition of the religious leaders, his trial and execution. This is not the list we might draw up to describe the life of one who is "blessed among women".

Like Jesus, she lives in the misty reality of our lives: sorrow and joy, confusion and hope mingling at every stage. Being blessed is not

a removal from all that life can through at us, but the grace of a heart that can steadily trust God, and find God's presence in the midst of whatever comes looking not for explanation but for hope. The gospel tells us that from the very beginning she learns to "ponder in her heart" all that she hears about her son.

So through the ages generations have seen in her both someone to be congratulated as the Mother of God and also one who knows the depth of human pain: Our Lady of Sorrows. To be "blessed among women" is to experience the fullest and deepest range of human experiences, and to allow these to be the birth or resurrection of newness of life.

August 15th is celebrated by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches as the feast of Mary's Assumption – Mary being carried body and soul into heaven. Whilst not all Anglicans share a belief in this, it remains the day the church remembers Mary because it was the most popularly celebrated festival day for her in England. The Assumption provides a picture (whether symbolic or literal) of God gathering up all that makes up a human life: body and soul, joy and sorrow and drawing all that we are into eternal life in God's presence where all that we are is glorified, all that we have lived finds its perfection in God's love.

Sometimes the image from Revelation 12 of the "woman clothed with the sun" is understood as Mary in the glory of heaven. The sun has cleared the mist and all that she has offered in a fully human life of sorrow and joy has been transformed to be her glory.

And so may it be for us.

As we learn to ponder in our heart all that has gone before us, all that we face in our own lives with their complex mix of sorrow and joy, confusion and help, may we learn from Mary how to offer all that we have been given to God, to find with her that each of us is blessed and all that we are, body and soul, sorrow and joy will find its glorification when we are carried beyond the mist to the full sunlight of God's presence eternally. Amen.

