

(Isaiah 61:10-11; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55)

Well, it has been a long time! A long time since I was last here with you for a Sunday service. A long time since I last gave a Sunday sermon. And a long time since Anna and I were stood here at the altar step for our wedding – or does it just feel that way?! For me, it has been a long time waiting for the right person to marry (but, as the refrain from Song of Songs says – which was read at our wedding – ‘do not awaken love until it is ready!’).

On an altogether different scale, for God’s people it was also a long time waiting for the arrival of the promised Messiah. As we heard in our second reading today, ‘When the fulness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman...’ This fulness of time was very much God’s time: God acted rather than wait any longer for his people to be fully ready. This is something to ponder as we await the second coming of Christ at the end of time.

As we know, our patron saint Mary, was instrumental in that fulfilment of God’s first promise. She was to be the ‘woman’ to bear his Son – even though she was still a young girl at the time. And without her humble, obedient response God’s plan for the salvation of the world could not have been carried out.

So Mary has a special place in our faith, which is why there are as many as five annual festivals commemorating her. The 8th of September is when Christians mark her birth and today, the nearest Sunday to that date, is when we observe our Patronal Festival here at St Mary’s parish church in Richmond.

We have much to learn from the example of our patron saint. Her humility and obedience are models of how we can open up our selves and our lives to be transformed by the God who loves each of us – and who wills all of us to become the fulfilled people he would have us be. But Mary also possessed a certain steeliness, an inner conviction of what was right – not only for herself but for the world. Her song, the Magnificat, which we heard in our gospel reading and which we will sing in our hymn, is a radical expression of the upside-down nature of the Kingdom of God. Mary says, ‘He has... lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things... according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants for ever’.

No wonder the events of Mary’s life, and death, are the focus of so many forms of devotion for so many Christians, amongst these her Assumption into Heaven. The thinking was that someone of such distinction surely at the point of death would be transported straight to heaven. There is no direct biblical record of this, of course, but somehow it feels right. Indeed, the concept of the Assumption is dear to our hearts here in Richmond, with the former Convent having borne that name. In the art world there are many moving paintings of that scene, like this one by El Greco.



Here, Mary is being crowned ‘the Queen of Heaven’ jointly by God the Father and God the Son – her son – at her arrival in heaven. As in most such scenes the Holy Spirit is also present, hovering overhead in the form of a dove.

Now I would be the last person to dismiss these scenes as invalid simply because they are not contained in Scripture. As the subject of an icon the Coronation of Mary surely affords a way in to contemplating the mysteries of the Trinity and of the Incarnation – which are at the very heart of our faith. I well remember encountering this very scene for the first time when visiting Toledo in Spain and being transported into a deep sense of wonder at the transcendence of our God.

We might recall, however, that in scripture we do have this assurance expressed by Saint Paul in his second letter to Timothy:

‘The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

if we endure, we will also *reign* with him’.

And that expression of the Christian hope is the theme of the Collect we use at Easter, the high point of the Christian year:

Lord of all life and power,
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son
overcame the old order of sin and death
to make all things new in him:
grant that we, being dead to sin
and alive to you in Jesus Christ,
may *reign* with him in glory.'

So, it is not just Mary who will be crowned in heaven: this is God's tender wish for each of us his children.

Another painting which captured my attention when I saw it for the first time was del Casantino's 'Death of the Virgin Mary' – which Anna and I saw only last week on a visit to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. The visit was Anna's idea, so I shall always be grateful to her for that!



Again, the subject is certainly not recorded in the Bible but it is another wonderful example of iconography, drawing us in to the mystery of God's love. Look at the way the risen and ascended Christ is holding the soul of Mary, depicted as a baby, at the moment of her death. What a wonderful image to behold on the day we commemorate her birth! And what an arresting reversal of the nativity scenes we are so used to!

I say again, it is not just Mary who is so deeply and tenderly loved by God the Holy Trinity, it is each of us – so much so that we have received the **promise**, clearly affirmed in Scripture, that we shall reign with our Saviour Jesus Christ in heaven.

And on this day when we celebrate Mary our patron saint, and give thanks for her example of humility, obedience – and of holiness, I conclude by affirming again the Christian hope as expressed in the Collect for Easter:

‘Lord of all life and power,
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son
overcame the old order of sin and death
to make all things new in him:
grant that we, being dead to sin
and alive to you in Jesus Christ,
may reign with him in glory.’

Thanks be to God. Amen.