



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Assumption BVM 2021 8.30 am

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Then the disciples returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying ... They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus.ⁱ

Those words come from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, and they are the last direct biblical reference to Mary.

However, many years of prayer and fellowship with the first generation Church remained to her after her Son's Ascension, Mary would have had a place of deepening affection and awe in the minds of the apostles.

And whether Mary stayed in Jerusalem - as tradition has it, or whether she travelled to Ephesus with John the Evangelistⁱⁱ and ended her days on earth there, Mary fulfilled that maternal role expressed in Jesus' dying words to his beloved disciple: *Mother there is your Son* and to *John, there is your Mother*.

We have no written record of Mary's life after Pentecost, save for those words from the beginning of Acts. Although we know that in the first centuries of the Church's life, Christians found it increasingly difficult to exclude Mary from their praise of Christ because the more they became aware of the glory of God in the face of Jesus, the more they saw Mary's life irradiated perfectly by it.

Christians, from the earliest days of what was to become Christianity, saw in Mary, a life lived from beginning to end in perfect harmony with God; a life lived from beginning to end as a visible and tangible expression of the redeemed Christian life; life lived in which God-given human potential was lived out all its richness.

So, very quickly, Mary began to play a key role, not just in the Church's oral traditions, but in the Church's

written theology and ecclesiology too; in the Church's hymns and songs and poems, in the Church's art and iconography.

As the Church's great Third General Council at Ephesus in 431ⁱⁱⁱ showed, it was only by making reference to Mary that the true *humanity* of Christ, fully God **AND** fully human could be defined and in so doing be preserved from a range of heresies which claimed that Jesus only seemed human or was human for a while and divine when he wasn't slumming it on earth as a human being.

As women and men prayed and explored the mystery of Christ in the life of the Church, hearts and minds were drawn, again and again, to Mary, the God bearer, *theotokos*, the first to love Christ, totally and without reserve; Mary the mother who delivered the Word made flesh into the hands of a waiting world; Mary who prepared her Son to meet and serve his world and his God; Mary who stood patiently at the foot of the cross and joined the disciples in constant prayer and thanksgiving.

Building on the ancient Jewish tradition that both Elijah and Enoch, who had found especial favour with

God, were carried straightway into the presence of God, it was a natural extension of the early Church's reflecting and praying that led to an widespread understanding of Mary's earthly fulfilment as a bodily "Assumption" into heaven; the *Koímēsis Theotokou*; an unambiguous and comprehensive sign of the dignity given by Christian faith to the whole person: a foretaste, if you like, of the destiny of all the baptized.

Mary's 'Dormition' and 'Assumption' quickly became the normative way of celebrating not just her whom all generations were to call blessed, but humanity itself - called, redeemed, aligned, liberated, and perfectly united with its Creator; the aim and goal of every believer.

If life beyond death, lived in the perpetual nearer presence of God, is the purpose for which we have *all* been created and, if this life is for learning with increasing sensitiveness and competence what faith and love actually are - what love looks like and feels like, how it is expressed and experienced - then Mary's complete obedience to the Father's will, her complete grasp of the Father's design and purpose for her, encapsulated in her unequivocal 'Yes', her *fiat* to God the Father's invitation to be the bearer of his Son - is

the paramount model for Christian discipleship and witness. Her Dormition and Assumption then, a precious foretaste of what awaits all who follow her Son, Jesus.

This feast of Mary, provides the Church – provides us at St Marylebone (The Blessed Virgin Mary of Tyburn) - with an annual reminder that it is by doing God's will *wholeheartedly*, with all that we are; by aligning our unruly wills with his perfect will; by fulfilling our God-given calling to be fully alive in Christ, that we shall, at length, by God's grace be welcomed into the eternal glory that Mary came to enjoy at the end of her earthly life.

Elizabeth Ruth Obbard^{iv}, a Carmelite nun in Norfolk, sums it up far better than I can:

'in the life of the Church', she writes, 'Mary is never contemplated apart from her Son but always in relationship to him. Mary has nothing purely of herself. All is grace and gift, from her conception to her assumption by way of the annunciation and nativity of Jesus. Her whole person is dependent on God, turned Godwards. In the assumption we visualize Mary's glory, and we have a foretaste of our own.'

A life affirmed and made radiant, penetrated by the blessed Trinity in every pore of its created being'.

St. Paul, too, tries to express something of this 'assumption mystery', the hope and destiny of every Christian woman, man and child, when he writes to the Corinthian Church:

'We do not want to have the old body stripped off. Rather our desire is to have the new body put on over it, so that that which is mortal may be absorbed into immortality. God has shaped us for this very end.'^v

God has indeed shaped us for this very end: to be with him and to enjoy him for ever.

Mary is *now*, what we *shall be*.

By God's prevenient grace and gift, may we follow Mary's example and, aided by her prayers, may we too come, at the last, to gaze on the face of Jesus her Son, in God's eternal presence for all eternity, where he lives Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God.

Amen.

ⁱ Acts 1.12f.

ⁱⁱ The **House of the Virgin Mary** (Turkish: *Meryem ana* or *Meryem Ana Evi*, "Mother Mary's House") is a Catholic and Muslim shrine located on Mt. Koressos (Turkish: *Bülbüldağı*, "Mount Nightingale") in the vicinity of Ephesus, 7 kilometres (4.3 mi) from Selçuk in Turkey. The house was discovered in the 19th century by following the descriptions in the reported visions of Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824), a Roman Catholic nun and visionary, which were published as a book by Clemens Brentano after her death. The Catholic Church has never pronounced in favour or against the authenticity of the house, but nevertheless maintains a steady flow of pilgrimage since its discovery. Anne Catherine Emmerich was Beatified by Pope John Paul II on October 3, 2004. Catholic pilgrims visit the house based on the belief that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was taken to this stone house by Saint John and lived there until her Assumption (according to Catholic doctrine) or Dormition (according to Orthodox belief). The restored portion of the structure has been distinguished from the original remains of the structure by a line painted in red. Some have expressed doubt about the site, as the tradition of Mary's association with Ephesus arose only in the 12th century, while the universal tradition among the Fathers of the Church places her residence, and thereby her Dormition, in Jerusalem.^[18] Supporters base their belief on the presence of the 5th century Church of Mary, the first basilica in the world dedicated to the Virgin Mary, in Ephesus.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05491a.htm>

^{iv} Sr. Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, *A Year with Mary*, Canterbury Press, 1998

^v I Corinthians 5.1-14