

Homily for The Solemnity of The Assumption (16/08/20)

The Solemnity of the Assumption is a truly joyful feast. As Mary sings in her Magnificat, 'my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour'. There is something very deep about this rejoicing. It is more than just joy at something wonderful, there is an added factor that multiplies the joy: it is rejoicing at something wonderful that has happened against all the odds, in spite of all the things that stood in the way. If your team wins a trophy that's a great thing, even if they were the favourites; but if they were the underdogs and everything went against them, but still they won – well that is a different level of joy altogether. Mary sings about the lowly exalted and the hungry filled, at the same time as the powerful and proud are put down. Mary sings about a new way of being, brought about by God's intervention: she is a young person, little more than a child, but that doesn't stop God acting through her; she is a woman, not a man, but again that hasn't got in God's way; she is poor and insignificant, unheard of in human terms living a simple life in a simple home, but again that has not got in the way. So her joy is joy magnified, joy multiplied, it is the joy of one chosen and used for great things, in spite of all that is against her.

In spite of all the things that stand against Mary, that seem to make her being the 'Gate of Heaven' so unlikely, she sings this song of joy as a woman of freedom. By the time of her arrival at Elizabeth's house any hesitancy and uncertainty that she may have had has melted away. There is no more 'But how can this come about...' she has taken to heart the message of the angel and the choice of God, and now she is singing of obstacles overcome with perfect confidence and trust. She has acquired a radical freedom: freedom from physical limitations, freedom from the prejudices of the age, freedom from cultural expectations and from material want. In her total freedom she has found great joy.

This freedom of Mary leads us deep into the heart of her holiness, but also deep into the heart of the Church. If someone were to ask 'What is the point of the Church? What is the point of Catholic Faith? You could give many different answers, but perhaps the simplest is to say: 'the Church exists to set people free, and all of its liturgy, its sacraments, its teaching is a toolkit to help us find and hold onto freedom'. What is the point of the Church? Setting people free, and Mary shows that freedom in great strength. So, of course, do many of the other saints. In fact that is almost the definition of a saint: someone who has achieved complete freedom. Think of a saint like St Francis, for example. At the risk of dumbing down a man who was at the same time very complex and very simple, he was also one of the freest men who ever lived. Possessing absolutely nothing – not even reputation or position, he was absolutely free to relate to people exactly as he should, because no-one could give him anything, nor could they take anything from him.

We are created for freedom, but so often we treat it either as too great a risk to possess, or as too important a thing to allow others. We allow ourselves to be trapped and even enslaved either as a trade-off for security or as because we simply do not realize how unfree we have become. So much about the world we live in sings a sweet song to us of compliance, of fitting in, of following the crowd,

of acquiring and possessing, of being part of the 'in' crowd who can band together against the 'out' crowd; or it offers us a taste of pleasure that looks like doing as we please until we discover that we cannot escape from owning and possessing and the need for increasingly powerful hits of pleasure, all of which is controlled by others who are making money from our compliant self-enslavement.

There is so much that is good and exciting about the world we live in, even – perhaps especially – in its present strange and uncertain version. But human society, full of fallen people, is in many ways a story of how we try to enslave one another and allow ourselves to be enslaved. The Church is the place where we can find a safe space from which to proclaim 'We were made for freedom, and we have the tools to help us find it'. And this feast shows us someone who has found perfect freedom, the beginning and image of the perfection to which we are joyfully summoned.