

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Solemnity of The Assumption 14<sup>th</sup> August 2022

The Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven, which we celebrate today, forms a part of the ancient Christian story, going back to the earliest days. It would be tempting to think of it as a pious story that somehow fixes Mary far above us, out of reach, to be admired only from afar, but in fact it is quite the reverse.

Bishop Erik Varden, formerly Abbot of Mount St Bernard's Abbey here in the UK, now Bishop of Trondheim, has a fascinating insight into what this feast means for us, which I found really fascinating. There is no point me trying to summarise it, so let me quote him at some length.

*"God cannot pass corporeally on earth without leaving traces. To have borne God into the world is no trivial matter. Think how we venerate objects connected with the saints, certain that something of the grace that changed their lives remains still in what they handled. Think how the bodies of saints are often found to be incorrupt, rendered resistant, it would seem, to decay for having been touched by divine power. How many million times must we multiply the potency of such examples to fathom what she must have been, and remained, who bore God in her womb for nine months?.....The power that transformed the Virgin's life and death is the power that can transform ours, too, if we would let it." (Erik Varden 'Entering The Twofold Mystery' 2022 p.241)*

'God cannot pass corporeally on earth without leaving traces' – yes, of course, that must be right. He cannot pass through the world without showers of grace falling from him at every step. Remember what happens when the Apostles begin to preach after Pentecost – people bring the sick and lay them on the streets on stretchers so that the shadow of Peter might fall on them as he walks past. The power of God is so strong, so transformative, that even those who have been close to him and have drunk deeply from his holiness leave traces as they pass by. Think of those shrines where healings have been brought about by the prayers of Our Lady and the saints: these are aftershocks that follow the outpouring of God's presence and his grace.

Mary carried the Son of God within her for nine months, and so her body and her soul were deeply irradiated by his presence, his holiness. The Assumption, it becomes clear, is not in fact about Mary being rewarded for her actions by being exalted far above our reach. In a sense it is precisely the opposite. The feast is really about saying that the inevitable result of living close to God is that something of his holiness rubs off upon you; the inevitable result of bathing every day in holiness is that some of it sticks. Mary was a real woman, real flesh and blood, facing the real issues, dangers and problems of family life, as well as all its joys and delights. She had the immense privilege of carrying God within her, but this privilege and the holiness that it magnified in her, are held up before us so that she can say to us 'something similar is there for you, too!' We cannot have the joy that she had of carrying the Son of God, but we can experience the truth that God cannot pass by without leaving traces, and so the more we place ourselves in the locations where he will pass, the more those traces will build up in us.

Life can often seem very challenging. There seems to be unrelenting bad news, and there is so much cruelty, selfishness, violence and anger in the world, The Assumption of Our Lady is, in the middle of all this, a great beacon of hope. It says to us 'You do not have to be a part of that world of violence and greed; you do not have to be caught up in that, it is not inevitable. These things do not need to triumph. You have the power to be something else. God cannot pass by without leaving traces, so place yourself, again and again, where he will pass. Let those traces of his presence fall on you. Develop a passion for holiness (which is, of course, no more than human life lived to the full). Our Lady will lead you there.'

So, what of Our Blessed Lady on this feast? What does she have to say to us? Is it all 'Look at me, high up and exalted'? Of course not. Her words, whispered tenderly to us today are much more like this. 'Come, come and sit beside me. Don't look at me, I have no beauty other than that which comes from God and is reflected in me. Sit with me and let us look at Him together; and looking at Him together let us be astonished by his loveliness. And being astonished by his loveliness, let us be captivated by his holiness. And being captivated by his holiness, let us allow that holiness – that simplicity, generosity, unselfishness, tenderness, tranquillity and hope to bathe us until we are so drenched in it that it becomes a part of you, as it has become a part of me. For God cannot pass by without leaving traces.'

And that, I think, is the true beauty of The Assumption of Our Lady.