

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Aug 15th 2016

Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary - Mass during the Day

It is not merely an assumption that Mary's Assumption into heaven, body and soul is a fact. This doctrine of the Catholic Church is ancient and was held true by the earliest followers in the Church. There was a tomb and a veneration of the place where Mary went to her final sleep. The Dormitatio is still held as a sacred space in the city of Jerusalem. At the Council of Chalcedon in 472, a request was made to have the bones of Mary translated to Constantinople for permanent veneration there. When the tomb was opened for that purpose, no bones or any vestiges remained. This fact fortified the belief held for centuries that Mary's body, through which Jesus came into this world, was taken up into heaven as was the Body of her Son.

The First Reading for this celebration today is always the same for this feast and always confusing. The "woman" of the vision by John, the writer of the Book of Revelations, is not Mary. The "woman" is the image of the nation Israel who would mother the Messiah. The child is not Jesus, but Moses who had been saved in the water of the Nile, saved from the Dragon, Leviathan. The whole Book of Revelation is the study of how the stars and planets reveal, when look at in a certain way, the struggle between good and evil, between God and human selfishness and violence. This battle would be entered and won by this Messiah, Jesus.

The Gospel is quite familiar to us by the names of the Visitation and the Magnificat wherein Mary visits Elizabeth and then proclaims God's goodness to and through her being God's handmaid. When looking for a scriptural foundation then for her being assumed, we find no hint at all. What we have is an angel coming down, a Spirit entering within, a going forth for a visit, and a Child exiting from within to stay. We need facts! We need faith. Lots of movements around and about, but there is nothing about her going upward. History, Archeology, etymology, astronomy and all of science reach for beginnings. We try as humans to come up with real hands-on data which can help us know who we are by learning from whence we have come and everything else as well. When we cannot find actual true beginnings, we have made up stories, legends and traditions. The history of this last word is the Latin, "hand-across". Now you know something as a fact, and so traditions are handed on from tribe to tribe, community to community. The belief in the Assumption of Mary is a "fact-faith", that is, something we Catholics believe, because it was held early as a fact, handed across to us, even though we do not have any evidence except the experience and faith of our early companions in the Christian Community. Here's a little side-thought for our pondering. The analytic sciences wish to prove everything and so to replace the role of Faith with the power of evidence and there will always be the "little black boxes" of reality that they will never find.

I spoke with the wife of a high school classmate of mine this morning. He died last week and so she was sharing with me about the goodness of his life. She related that near his death he said to her, "Well I am off to heaven and if there isn't a heaven, well I'll be dead and not know it." The importance to our faith which is celebrated with this liturgy is that faith within questioning and fears and doubts is the center of our response to God's relating with us. Mary was asked to hear, trust, travel, and live fully what she heard, or believed she heard. Maybe the angel wasn't real and she just imagined that, or wished it were true. Reality did set in and within her womb and that of Elizabeth's. Reality came forth in Bethlehem and throughout Israel in the life of Jesus and to His Death. Quite a final reality and Mary

kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. Did she doubt and tremble with fear, of course, she was a human. Did she trust while shaking in her sandals? She did! This feast celebrates her fidelity to all that she believed and encourages us all to shake, question, ponder and wait to see if we will live beyond death or just die. We do not assume that we will be raised ourselves, we believe it!

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