

*Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved. Ps. 80:18*

Thank you to Christine, the choir and our Crescendo guests for the music today honoring Mary, the mother of our Lord. Her feast day is tomorrow, August 15.

Sweet Mary. Holy Mary. Humble and willing Mary. These are the images we have of The Blessed Virgin who became willing to do what God asked her to do. Mary experienced great joys as the mother of Jesus, and she surely suffered greatly as she saw her son tortured and hung on a cross to die.

Through the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary we learn again that hard lesson. We hope that if we do the right thing, if we answer God's call, we will be rewarded, we will be blessed. We will be surrounded by happiness, family, friends, honors, maybe even riches. But being blessed doesn't necessarily mean that everything comes up roses. You and I **are** blessed by God, **and**, that doesn't mean that we will be protected from harm, or grief or feelings of isolation, just like the Blessed Mary.

August 15<sup>th</sup> has been the date to honor Mary since the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Episcopal Church celebrates St. Mary day, and it is considered a major feast day of our church. What is not mentioned in **our** calendar is that in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Oriental Christian churches this feast is called the Assumption of the BVM. For those of you without a Roman Catholic background, assumption means to be taken bodily into heaven.

The history of how the Assumption came to be so important to the church is part of Sacred Tradition, in other words, not from Scripture. The story is that Mary lived out her days in Jerusalem, or perhaps Ephesus, and at the end of her life, she was taken in bodily form up to heaven as a fulfillment of the promise that Jesus had prepared a place for her. Roman Catholic theologians still debate whether that assumption happened before or after Mary died.

The simple reason why we Episcopalians do not celebrate the Assumption of Mary is because it is not found in scripture. There's nothing about her in the Bible after she was at the foot of the cross. We are Christians who ground our faith on Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Mary's *virginity* is part of Scripture and is a mystery of our faith. What I believe through faith, is that what was virginal about Mary was not a physical gynecological state, it was her openness, her willingness, her understanding that she was called by God and answered that call.

What is usually missing about the celebration of Mary is honoring her as a prophet. We get all caught up in the detail about her virginity and miss the big picture. She was as much a prophet as any of those well known Biblical prophets. She just didn't write about it. But the Gospel writer Luke did pay

attention to what Mary had to say to us. His Gospel gives us a glimpse into her life, more than any other.

Her call was at the annunciation when she said to the angel and to God, *“Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”* Luke 1:38 She became willing to be God’s servant, and she had God-given visions of what Jesus, her son, would be to the people and the world. She had words for the people of her century and of ours.

Centuries of male theologians and priests have pointed to Mary’s humility and willingness. But they never speak of her spunk, her courage and boldness to speak God’s truth. She told us about who God is; The Mighty One who scatters the proud in their contempt for others. God brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. And Mary tells us that God has mercy on us just as the Lord had mercy on Abraham. We are given mercy as descendants of Abraham... forever.

Elizabeth knew who Mary was when the two cousins visited. Blessed are you among women, Elizabeth said. And later, Mary would tell servants at a wedding in Cana to follow the directions that Jesus gives. Do whatever he tells you. Mary knew much.

To address our Gospel for today, I wonder if Mary had heard Jesus say these words about divisions in families. I wonder what Mary thought of the confrontations that would surely spring up if a member of the family chose to follow her son. She surely knew that these divisions that must and would occur in the lives of Christian disciples. I wish we could hear more from Mary.

Jesus is just acknowledging that conflict will happen when we adopt a new way of life. In this new world order that Jesus has introduced, we will live in the knowledge that the powerful will be brought down in the long run, fear must succumb to courage, and self-righteousness will give way to forgiveness and mercy. This may not sit well in the traditional family of the day, and it may not sit well in our families today.

We heard today also from the prophet Isaiah. He and Mary have a common message; that God intends good for us; happiness, productivity resulting in a bounty of good grapes. But Isaiah takes it a bit further in his metaphor of the vineyard. God has planted us and done everything to help us to be fruitful and successful.

Our Lord expected that we would be just to each other, but God sees bloodshed and violence instead between people. God expected that we would be righteous; that is, honest, trusting and faithful, but we have not. We produce not good, sweet grapes but sour little wild grapes just as we see growing by the side of the road all around here. And so the result is not that we will be uprooted by God, but that God will take down the wall and the hedge that surrounds us. We will become vulnerable and will have to suffer the consequences of our bad choices.

And so it is with the people that Mary told us about in her prophecy. If you are too powerful, you'll get your just desserts. If you are greedy you may experience deprivation as you have deprived others. Neither Mary nor Isaiah are shy about speaking God's truth, as difficult as it is to say ...and to hear.

Mary's life had both great joy and great sorrow. Much like we experience too. On one of the most joyous days that Mary must have experienced as a mother – the day that the baby Jesus was taken to the temple to be blessed and named, the old priest Simeon spoke very prophetic words:

**"Then Simeon blessed them and said to ... Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-- and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Luke 2:34-35**