

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> August 2025 i.e. Patronal Festival.

Revelation 11:19-12:6, 10

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 1:46-55

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

Blessed Mary, the mother of our Lord, is pretty special. One of the ways she's special is that, whereas most Saints get one special day each year when we celebrate their life and witness, Mary gets loads. I should say that I'm a bit of a geek about this sort of thing, so I hope you will indulge me as I share a bit of Church-related geekiness...

The Church of England has a special calendar that tells us what Saints days to celebrate when. It lists five days for celebrating Mary. They are – in the order of the calendar year – the Annunciation of Our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary [25<sup>th</sup> March]; the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Elizabeth [31<sup>st</sup> May]; a general celebration simply called “The Blessed Virgin Mary” [15<sup>th</sup> August]; the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary [8<sup>th</sup> September]; and the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary [8<sup>th</sup> December].

Those are just the days on the calendar where Mary is named. There are also a number of events celebrated on other feast days that couldn't very well have happened without Mary: Christmas is an obvious example of that. Only two other saints get more than one feast day: they are Saint Paul and John the Baptist, each of whom get two – and Paul has to share one of his with Saint Peter. So even the Church of England calendar, which is muted in its enthusiasm for Mary in comparison with other Churches' calendars, ends up lavishing attention on her. There must be something special about Mary.

Mainstream Anglicanism isn't enthusiastic about Mary... A clear example of that is the feast we celebrate today. In the Church of England calendar this is simply called “The Blessed Virgin Mary”. However, Catholics in the West call the feast which falls on the 15<sup>th</sup> August “the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary”. There's a story behind that strange name. Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after Easter. Catholic tradition says that something similar happened to Mary: she also ascended bodily into heaven, or was “assumed”, at the end of her time on earth. Protestants say that there isn't any scriptural evidence that Mary ascended into heaven so we shouldn't celebrate it; and that's probably why the Church of England is pleasantly vague about this day in our calendar. I

guess the hope is that if they don't say anything the Protestants won't notice it's there.

Every special day in our church calendar, including every Sunday, has a special prayer to go with it. These are the Collects which we pray near the beginning of every Sunday service. I didn't like the prayer the Church chose for the "Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary": it says some things that don't seem particularly relevant; so I chose a different prayer that the Church of England has authorised for any celebration about Mary. [You can find it in The Common of the Saints – the Blessed Virgin Mary]. It's the one printed in your booklets. I'm going to be talking about it, so you might want to find it and have a look.

Essentially, the prayer explains why Mary has such an important place in our Christian story. God accomplishes something amazing through her: he "raise[s up] fallen humanity". That seems like a reference to the Ascension of Jesus: Jesus, who is both fully human and fully divine. When he gets raised up we are also raised up. The prayer also talks about how "we have seen [God's] glory revealed in our human nature and [God's] love made perfect in our weakness..." That also seems like a reference to Jesus. He showed us what it would look like for a person to be completely united with God; and he carried on showing that even to the end.

But the writer of this prayer has done something really clever. As with all the best bits of Anglican liturgy, you can interpret it in different ways. Those Anglicans who have a more Protestant perspective will see in these words clear references to Jesus; and we can all agree that it is good to be more like Jesus, as the prayer says. But those at the Catholic end of things might be inclined to wonder. Is it true that God's glory is only revealed in one human life? Or can other human lives reveal God's glory? Can those other lives mediate grace to us – if not in the same way as Jesus does, then at least in ways that are similar to Jesus, or which derive from Jesus?

And Catholics like to say: well, yes, other human lives can reveal God's glory. And out of all the human lives they might choose, it is Blessed Mary who shows that most clearly.

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I've talked before here about how good theology is like play. It's worth being clear what I mean by that. When we talk about play, we normally mean something trivial; but I'm not thinking of something trivial. I have in my mind a picture of a nature documentary on the TV: and David Attenborough (or whoever it is) is watching two lion cubs play-fighting. And David tells us that

while this play-fighting looks very cute, in a way it's deeply serious. For those cubs, as with most young animals, including humans, play is preparation; it is exercise; it is training. In the safe environment of the family circle those cubs are figuring out what they will need to know in order to survive and thrive as adults.

Theology is a lot like that kind of play. Theology includes everything we say and sing on Sunday mornings/ It helps us work out what we believe: what we hope for, what we have faith in, what we love. Ideally the community of the Church is a safe place in which we can try saying things and doing things before we choose to live our lives by them. So I say that a lot of what we do here has the character of play. I'm thinking particularly of moments in our liturgy when we confess our sins, or where we share peace with each other. Hopefully, if we're exercising those muscles regularly here, we'll be able to do the same thing out there, in the rest of the week. Theological play, liturgical play, is the first step to being an adult disciple.

Why am I talking about theology, and play? Well, it seems to me that a lot of the things our Catholic tradition says about Mary have the character of play that I've been describing. Theologians agreed fairly early on that Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after Easter. Well and good. But what if Jesus isn't the only person who ascended into heaven? What would that be like – how would it help us? What would it change? Those are playful questions, questions that our tradition has indulged through bits of theology like that prayer in your service booklets. We know that Mary was with Jesus through most of his ministry, and that she enjoyed a deeper insight than most people into what God was doing through him. What if she was caught up in his saving gift in other ways too?

Through the stories we have in the Bible, and the stories the Church has told since, Mary shows us what salvation looks like. Mary didn't just say yes to God once: God's purposes shone through her whole life. And if that's true of her life, why not her death too? And why not whatever happened next?

Devotion to Mary – the belief that she embodied our hope in concrete ways, and that she's a person worth paying a lot more attention to – is not a fringe position in Christianity. As the kids say these days: it's not a bug. it's a feature of Christianity. And with Christians throughout the ages we rejoice to call her blessed.

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