

Feast of the Assumption, August 15th 2021

I won't forget the night that France won the World Cup. As the goals were scored, we heard cheers from the cafes and restaurants nearby where fans were gathered before huge screens.

After France had won a parade of cars and motorbikes continued in the street in front of our house in Nice until past midnight. Many two wheeled vehicles carrying two passed waving tricolors and young French boys and girls sat on the opened boots of cars waving flags.

It wouldn't have been the same if the English team had won (or if they had beaten Italy in the Euro Cup a few weeks ago). There would have been drinking and brawling – the French just don't do that, at least not on the scale of Anglo-Saxons.

The victory night reminded me that I'm not French and that although I love living here I remain different. I witnessed something that I was not fully part of – even though I found French behaviour exhilarating and entertaining.

I wonder whether devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, Our Lady, seems foreign to us like the French way of celebrating.

I think this is true even though there are reminders of Mary all around us. Many of our parish churches dating back to pre-Reformation times are dedicated to her. Her feast days are still honoured in our prayer books: The Conception of Mary (December 8), Nativity of Mary (September 8), Annunciation (March 25), Visitation (July 2), and Purification (February 2).

Next week's public holiday, Assumption Day, reminds us of her, even here in secular France,

Images of Mary are instantly recognizable to those who have been brought up in Western culture. Apart from Christ himself, the person most represented is his mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. Significant points in her life have been depicted by artists countless times.

Statues and images of the Virgin can be seen in every Catholic Church and many Anglican churches. There are local festivals and processions: in Nice a statue of the Virgin, decked with flowers, is taken out into the port on Assumption Day with a small flotilla of fishing boats.

But where do Anglicans and Episcopalians begin to connect with this? The place to begin is her relation to Christ. From the first centuries of Christianity, much effort was put into understanding how Jesus could be both human and divine. All four Gospels asserted his divine nature, that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God. But they also asserted that he was fully human and that his humanity came from his mother, Mary.

In Christian tradition, the transmission of Christ's humanity is usually explained like this. Jesus is obedient to the will of God and without sin. Consequently, he must have received from his mother a sinless, unspoiled humanity.

Therefore, Mary is different. If she had simply been a human being like all others, she would have inherited the consequences of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – sin, separation from God, and death. If, though, Jesus is sinless, he must have received this from his mother following some special gift or intervention from God. This gift leads on to the doctrine, that, by a special act of God, Mary was born without sin herself – the doctrine of the Immaculate (without sin) Conception. This, the argument goes, becomes necessary once we believe that Christ as sinless.

This helps us to understand what the doctrine of the Assumption is about. If Mary was born without sin and passed on a perfect and unflawed humanity to her son, Jesus, she will not suffer the consequence of original sin – death.

The main, Western and Eastern traditions of Christianity use different language to describe the consequences of this.

Rather like the language that we use to describe the way Christ withdrew to be with God the Father – we say that he 'ascended' - the Roman Catholic tradition teaches that Mary was assumed into heaven – the Assumption. On the other hand, Orthodox Christians talk about Mary at the end of her life falling asleep - the Dormition.

The problem for Anglicans and Episcopalians is that this may be logical but it still remains foreign. We have to make an imaginative effort to enter into the culture of devotion which is so natural to Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians.

But this is not the point at which to end. I think it's better to look at Mary in her culture. In any culture, even to the present day, it is not easy to be an unmarried mother. In her culture, Mary was brave and self-reliant. She accepts the will of God and agrees to be the mother of his son (and, so, is a model of Christian behaviour), at the same time risking the ostracism and disgrace of an unmarried mother. In John's gospel, at the wedding at Cana, she is unabashed in asking that something is done about the wine running out. She, and the other women, are the only people to stay with him as Jesus is crucified, the men having run away.

So we can conclude with some pictures of Mary, which the festivals of the Church's year highlight. When she is told that she will be the mother of God's Son, she is humble and obedient. As Jesus' mother, she is closer to him than any other being – she bore him, raised him and witnessed his death. At the end of her earthly life, she is lifted to heaven to be with him.

So, Mary is someone whose life we can relate to and a model of how we might live as followers of her Son, Jesus. I also think that ignoring her is devotionally impoverishing. There's an unconscious sign of this in the way that Jesus is sentimentalized (even feminised) in some religious art. Perhaps, this is because the feminine principal represented by Mary is otherwise absent.

Perhaps, the only way for Anglicans and Episcopalians (and others not RC or Orthodox) to learn the language of Mary – to make her less foreign – is to include her in our prayers. A place to begin may be with the most frequently and widely used of all prayers offered to her: Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death Amen.

Mark Frank, (1612-1665) one of the Caroline Divines and a 17th century Prayer Book Highchurchman sums up my personal view in a sermon on the day of the Annunciation of the BVM:

"Give we her in God's name the honour due to her. God hath stiled her 'blessed' by the Angel, by Elizabeth; commanded all generations to call her so, and they hitherto have done it, and let us do it too. Indeed, some of late have overdone it; yet let us not therefore underdo it, but do it as we hear the Angel and the first Christians did it; account of her and speak of her as the most blessed among women, one 'highly favoured,' most 'highly' too. But all the while give *Dominus tecum* all the glory, the whole glory of all to Him; give her the honour and blessedness of the chief of the saints, Him only the glory that she is so, and that by her conceiving and bringing our Saviour into the world we are made heirs, and shall one day be partakers of the blessedness she enjoys, when the Lord shall be with us too, and we need no angel at all to tell us so."