Tr11(2021o)

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

Besides being the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, last Tuesday was the Feast of the Assumption of Mary for those of us in our Province who use the *Missal* and not just the 1928BCP. Since we use the Missal here we are also today commemorating the Octave of Mary’s Assumption into heaven. Assumption comes from the Latin word *assumptire* [assump-tear-ay] meaning: to take up.

The feast has lost some of its popularity since the Reformation. Many Protestant denominations do not recognize it at all, regarding it as “one of those ***Popish*** things” which lacks a solely Scriptural basis. While Mary's Assumption is not directly in the Bible, it began appearing in various non-canonical narratives, such as *The Book of Mary's Repose,* as early as the Fourth Century.

In the American RC church in many dioceses the Assumption is still a “Day of Obligation”, although many dioceses have conveniently moved it to Sundays which always is a day of obligation for all Christians. The Episcopal Church, with its *1979 Prayer Book*, did make the Assumption a recognized Feast Day, although they placed in their supplementary liturgy book known as, “***Lesser*** *Feasts and Fasts*”.

So what is the belief behind the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and why is that important to us today in the 21st Century? First, the universal Church believes that Mary is in heaven, although there is some disagreement as to whether she reigns there as Queen or Queen Mum. Regardless, she is “higher than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim”.

Further, while there is also disagreement as to the moment of the Assumption, the Church's belief whether it be Orthodox, RC, or Anglican, is that Mary was bodily assumed into heaven after her life ended here on earth. While this might sound incredible upon hearing, there is definite Biblical precedent for such an occurrence.

We need to keep in mind that in the Second Chapter of the Second Book of Kings the prophet Elijah is taken from Elisha's presence by being caught up to heaven in a whirlwind. Also, the non-canonical OT *Book of Enoch* relates that Enoch (Noah's great-grandfather) was so good that he simply walked into heaven. Finally, while not a bodily assumption such as Enoch”s or Elijah's, Moses had the unique distinction in human history of being personally buried by God himself.

Traditionally Roman Catholics have believed that Mary, unlike her son, did not really taste death but was taken by angels at the very moment of death to heaven. This is based in part upon the theology that as the temple of life, as Jesus' mother, she could not suffer death, as St. John of Damascus held. While this is the traditional Roman view, many Catholics in good standing today hold with the Orthodox view that Mary actually died but was assumed on the third day, like her son, before her body would have begun to suffer corruption.

What about the Anglican Realm? While never raising it to dogma, Anglican bishops including our founding bishop, Abp. Morse, liked to point out that believing in the Assumption of Mary into heaven is a very reasonable belief.

For one thing, there is no history suggesting Mary met a violent death, say by fire or being cast into the sea. Secondly, this teaching of Mary was well established throughout all of Christendom by the Seventh Century, including in the *Oriental* Orthodox world (which had separated themselves from the Universal church by 450AD after the first three Ecumenical Councils).

In addition to the above there is one other testimony. Unlike any other saint, no person, parish, college, monastery, or diocese in the entire world ever has claimed to have any relic of Mary, such a bone from her body. As the legal axiom about something being self-evident goes: The thing speaks for itself.

*“and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”*

**+**

This portion of St. Paul's first Epistle to the church in Corinth is one of the greatest and also hardest to understand in the whole NT. It **also** ties in nicely with the Assumption.

St. Paul's reasoning can be challenging in any of his Epistles, all of which are hard to wade through. But, the central point he makes here is that Jesus' Resurrection has changed forever how men should view death.

Now St. Paul had some heavy rowing to do with the Corinthians to confirm them of the Gospel, of the Good News. As Greeks they had grown up pagan with many gods. *The*y had a quite firm and detailed understanding of what they believed happened after one died.

While they greatly feared death as the great unknown, they nonetheless looked upon it as the moment when one would be freed of his imprisoning body (a bit like the Klingons). The body was a **tomb** which hemmed in one's spirit. Once freed of its earthly prison, one’s soul would be absorbed by the gods. One would never see one's body again.

Now the Jews on the other hand had a very different view of what happened after death. A non-evil soul went to *Sheol* [shay-ohl]. Also called *Gehenna*, it was a shadow world, a land of no light or energy. What happened after that still remains somewhat undefined in Jewish theology. But in Jesus' time, the belief was that in Sheol men lived some ill defined, weak shadowy existence (like one's backyard about 2AM). The Pharisee's has some sort of ill defined belief about souls leaving *sheol* and going eventually to heaven, as we see in the story of Lazarus and the Rich man where the latter is in torment while Lazarus is at Abraham's bosom.

Not surprisingly then Jews also feared death. While it is true that the Pharisee's also had a belief in a resurrection at the end of all time, not all Jews, such as the Sadducees, shared that general resurrection belief, which was still weakly defined at Jesus time.

Into these two belief structures came St. Paul's arresting, very clear Gospel message that Jesus, after his horrible death, had come back to life, soul AND body. What can we learn from Jesus reappearance in his body after his death?

We might remember that Mary Magdalene stopped weeping at the tomb when she heard Jesus **voice**. It sounded familiar . Her eyes were opened from sorrow and she cried, “rabboni!” Those on the road to Emmaus did not recognize with whom they were conversing *until* Jesus opened **their** eyes in the breaking of bread. Then...they recognized their Lord.

That the disciples, from Mary Magdalene to the Apostles, to James the Lord's brother, all recognized Jesus meant that he looked and sounded familiar, but not necessarily as he had days earlier walking and teaching everywhere. Jesus' personality remained, yet He bore wounds in his body. But only a few wounds.

The Gospels do **not** recount Jesus peacefully reassuring his disciples after his Resurrection still looking as if he had just stepped off the cross: all horribly beaten. Jesus, while perfect in human and divine nature had nonetheless **himself** changed from what he had been in his own human prime. His resurrected body incorporated the five piercings through him made by human wickedness.

This should be comforting to us in looking at our own death's. Not only can we look forward to seeing our bodies again at the end of time, unlike the Greeks' belief, we can look forward to seeing them **perfected** when our souls are reunited with them, unlike the Pharisee's. We will look *better* than we have in our prime.

We will not go through eternity with the broken or infirm body with which we died. We will be different, yet familiar.

Until the time when our souls are reunited with our perfected bodies, our personalities, our uniqueness, our voices, as the disciples perceived in Jesus after his resurrection, that which makes us familiar to others...will remain. How remains a Divine mystery.

Too often today people in our society show signs of unbelief in life after death. They do this by showing great fear of death, as opposed merely discomfort at an unknown doorway which all cross.

We see this in how the most important matters of our age today revolve around death: better doctors, better research, better equipment, better medicines, better health care. Other generations poured their communities' time, money, and talent into building churches, shrines, and cathedrals. Ours are poured into hospitals and health activities to *squeeze* out every possible **moment** of earthly existence.

Just last week there was a news story in the *WSJ* about a well-off young couple with three kids where daily they spend time not just stretching, meeting with a trainer or exercising, but also on, say, posture exercises and TM, and “Affirmations”. They also “bio-hack” their bodies and their home.

They rent a house they have customized to interact well with their bodies with expensive equipment to produce their ideal sound vibrations and give them extra oxygen while exercising. They take vitamins specifically designed for their genes. The wife takes 23 such prescription vitamins per day. The husband—brace yourself—takes daily: **150**. (So much for pizza,)

Now it is not wrong to want to be healthy or to want to ease suffering.in others. Indeed, we should take care of our bodies, as temples for the Holy Spirit. And we should help others who suffer, as Jesus did. Yet, as with much in our lives, spiritual or physical, the question comes down to one of **focus**.

As we have talked before, what is the purpose behind any prayer, or indeed any activity? Just as some churches bear inscriptions, *ad majorem gloriam Dei* (to the greater glory of God), we sometimes meet people who see their entire lives as in service to the Lord, such as monastics. But, sometimes we see such people in the secular realm.

The early 1980s film *Chariots of Fire* was about the English track team for the 1924 Olympics. Their star sprinter, Eric Liddell, was a devout Scottish Christian who refused, despite enormous pressure even from the Crown Prince of England, to run as the heavy favorite in the 100 meters final, because it would be on a Sunday.

The soon to become missionary to China's faith was rewarded, as we might recall, when another teammate who had already won a gold medal gave up his spot in the much longer 400 meter four days later. Because Liddell had finished third in the 200 meter he was given no chance to win this much longer race which, as the film captures, he DID win.

So, as with any action, when we pray we need to have a proper **focus**. Is there a desire to somehow glorify God? To help others? Or is it really just about how great I am or what I want for myself? As the Psalm goes: "For though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly; as for the proud, he beholdeth them afar off."

In our Gospel the Pharisee's prayer was all about HIM. He thanked God only for one thing: the fact that he was **better** than anybody else. To us he appears almost a caricature of what is bad in prayer, but in Jesus' time folks would have regarded him as most pious, and silently cheered him on. This Pharisee was a man who not only had avoided any serious transgression of the Commandments, but also one, it was viewed, upon whom the Lord had BLESSED with ability to fulfill all of God's Law completely.

In contrast, however, the publican's prayer **was** pleasing to God, even though it also was all about him as well, because his prayer focused on unworthiness compared to **God's** greatness, His holiness. The Publican knew how bad he was relative to God and would not even lift up his eyes.

So, our biggest prayer is already answered in that mankind does not need to fear death if**, if,** one has led a Christian life trying to follow Jesus. And this is probably THE pivotal teaching of the Church and the one Saint Paul was trying to get the Corinthians to understand. The grace which flows from Baptism will guide us to, as our Collect puts it, “run the way of His Commandments”, **if** we let the Holy Spirit guide us.

Good Christians need not fear death as non-believers almost always do. While only Mary was Assumed, we can rest assured of being a partaker of the Lord's “heavenly treasure”, as our Collect puts it, especially the treasure of being reunited at the end of time with our **perfected** bodies. AMEN. **+**